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Between Boulevard and Boudoir:

Working Women as Urban Spectacle in Nineteenth-Century French and British Literature

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by

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Dedication

For Madeleine, who changed my relationship to work, and Robert, who made this work possible.

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Between Boulevard and Boudoir: Working Women as Urban Spectacle in Nineteenth-Century French and British Literature

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Between Boulevard and Boudoir examines the nineteenth-century obsession with documenting the modern metropolis and analyses visual and verbal portraits of working women to investigate how urban literature invented the seamstress as a type. Approaching the nineteenth-century city as a site of passive voyeurism where social relationships were increasingly mediated by print culture, I argue that sketches of French *grisettes* and British sempstresses replaced the endless variety among working-class women with a repetitive sameness through the fictionalization of these urban figures. Transforming producers of commodities into objects of consumption, popular fiction showcased the visibility of the city's working women while ignoring their actual labor. These women were thus portrayed as exploited bodies, rather than exploited workers, destined to adorn, and then disappear into, the crowded city.

This dissertation looks first at what Walter Benjamin dubbed "panoramic literature" — texts that sought to describe the metropolis and its inhabitants through a categorization of people and places based on appearances — and asserts that these fragmentary depictions created a widely recognizable urban typology that gained cultural

currency and, ultimately, influenced other authors. Analyzing French and British urban text, I maintain, however, that even the most stereotyped representations destabilized the structures of classification that defined the working woman as a type. While novelists Eugène Sue, G.W.M. Reynolds, Charles Dickens, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning all seem to valorize self-supporting women, I demonstrate that, by turning their workers into wives and expelling them from the city, they discredit the premise of an urban destiny that confined these women to a type. This examination of the unique position of working women in Paris and London not only challenges established notions about nineteenth-century constructions of gender but also provides insight into the anxieties – vis-à-vis the rapidly changing city – that plagued the writers who codified these women as types. Investigating the fictionalization of working women, this study opens up urban literature to considerations of how gender and class determine inclusion within the city as it was produced by print culture.

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Introduction: Writing the Seamstress into the Fabricated City

Stressing the signifying power of the nineteenth-century metropolis, Charles Dickens famously sought inspiration in urban crowds and proclaimed, "What inexhaustible food for speculation do the streets of London afford!"[1] This view of the city as a space of encountered stories (rather than mere sights) informs urban literature of the period – from cheap boulevard fiction to prose poems and verse novels – as writers in London and Paris turned their gaze upon the scenes of everyday life. Because the city did not reveal its stories to just anyone, writers like Dickens emphasized their own proclivity for "reading" scenes and sights that a mere pedestrian might have deemed meaningless. As the city was increasingly mined for narrative, however, certain people and places within the urban panorama were so frequently described that they came to be viewed as instantly legible types and spaces that even the least perceptive city dwellers could associate with predictable characteristics.[2] One urban figure that acquired such exaggerated significance in the verbal and visual representations of city life was the working-class seamstress. Women who sewed for a living (whether under illustrious dressmakers or from their homes as ill-paid pieceworkers) appeared repeatedly in the newspapers of the 1830s and 40s as the protagonists of narratives, the central figure in caricatures, or the topic of serious social inquiry, and subsequently became closely associated with the cities they inhabited. As the representations of these women

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[1] Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz* 1836 (London: Penguin, 1985) 80.

[2] The transformation of people into predictable types is discussed in much greater length in chapter 1.

proliferated, they solidified into recognizable types (the French grisette and the British sempstress) that more obviously reflected the fantasies and desires of the men who invented them rather than the conditions of real working women in Paris or London. Investigating these fantasies, *Between Boulevard and Boudoir* considers the extent to which representations of these working women embody an idealized urban type that increasingly defined the parameters of acceptable female visibility within the city.

Just as nineteenth-century seamstresses captured the imagination of poets and painters, satirists and social scientists, they have likewise attracted the attention of later critics, most notably Lynn Alexander, Joan Scott, and Victoria Thompson, who have staked out and described the special niche (circumscribed by gender and class) that these women occupied in the social imagination.[3] These studies have, for the most part, looked upon fictional grisettes and sempstresses as products of their urban milieu; I will argue, however, that these women were not only constructed by the cities in which they appeared but that they also helped shape these very spaces that contained them. Grisettes and sempstresses – as fictional types invented by journalists and artists – were, of course, reductive figures that stood in for an intensely heterogeneous group of laboring women. The cities in which they circulated – the Paris and London of popular print culture – were similarly fictionalized. Looking at invented types within imagined cities, I show that writers used grisettes and sempstresses as convenient (and easily understandable) tools as they worked through some of the contradictions posed by the modernity of the

[3] Lynn M. Alexander, *Women, Work, and Representation: Needlewomen in Victorian Art and Literature* (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2003); Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988); Victoria E. Thompson, *The Virtuous Marketplace: Women and Men, Money and Politics in Paris, 1830-1870* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2000).

transforming nineteenth-century city. That is to say that, in inventing these clichéd types, writers and artists may have (albeit somewhat inadvertently) created models that could guide befuddled Parisians and Londoners through the social – and, indeed, geographic – turmoil that defined modern urban life.[4] Indeed, as writers turned working-class women into signifiers of urban experience, they were, in fact, providing insight into the lived nineteenth-century city which tells us less, perhaps, of how it actually was but, rather, how it came to exist in the collective imagination.

The cities that emerged from within the pages of the popular press – and from the urban literature of the 1830s and 40s in particular – were hyperbolic spaces that staged oppositional scenes of splendor and misery for a public eager to consume these images. While writers like Dickens and artists like French printmaker Honoré Daumier quickly identified the bourgeoisie as a powerful force in shaping the modern city, numerous commentators were drawn to exaggerated juxtapositions of the high and low social sectors made inevitable by the crowded metropolis. By constructing Paris and London as sites of tension – divided between the frivolity of aristocratic ballrooms and the privations of working-class garrets – the authors and artists I consider throughout this study share a romantic view of this struggle and regularly describe the impoverished spaces inhabited by seamstresses as sites of authenticity within cities full of masked types. Seamstresses, in other words, were evoked as emblems of simplicity or

[4] The idea that art and literature reflected – or was even a response to – the changing urban scene has been addressed by numerous critics, so I will limit my discussion of this popular print phenomenon to the way in which grisettes and sempstresses emerged from within it (and, in turn, played a role in shaping a particular nineteenth-century view of the urban artist). See Richard Terdiman, *Discourse / Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985).

transparency that served as antidotes to the widespread dissimulation made possible by the anonymity of the city. Moreover, as distinct figures that could move between the aristocratic (and bourgeois) circles they clothed and the workers among whom they lived, grisettes and sempstresses occupied a unique space in the popular imagination as exemplars of an enviable sort of urban mobility. Viewed as genuine (and therefore legible) types that circulated amid the spectacles of urban life, seamstresses were depicted in such a way that emphasized their visibility while ignoring their labor as they were situated in the fictional city as portals to the experience of urban modernity.

The City in the Space of Theory

If the figure of a seamstress was enough to suggest the city in nineteenth-century art and letters, it is obvious that her existence as a feature of the Parisian and London cityscapes is very much rooted in the specificities of this time and of these places. While both cities competed throughout the century for the right to numerous superlatives (the most industrialized, the most urbanized, the most influential, etc.), it is clear that they underwent many of the same changes and processes that, in turn, made them such obvious contenders for the status as the nineteenth-century city *par excellence*.[5] Both cities, for example, experienced massive population growth via emigration from the rural provinces and through incorporating outlying suburban areas into the city proper and had to find (or fail to find, as it were) immediate ways to adapt to and accommodate this new

[5] While Walter Benjamin famously declared Paris the capital of the nineteenth century, I think that this is a bit too dismissive of London's obvious contributions to the changing notion of *urbanness* during this time period. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999) 3, 14.

influx of people, capital, and labor power.[6] And both cities were visibly anxious to simultaneously profit from and pacify their large working-class segments that rebelled against the harsh economic conditions under which they were forced to live and labor. While Paris and London adopted some similar tactics (such as increased police repression and censorship) and underwent some very different experiences (such as revolutions and labor strikes), I am more interested in how they – similarly and differently – fostered a climate of intense urban observation and self-examination. That is to say that both cities rehearsed and tried on different definitions of *urbanness* as city dwellers tried to come to terms with what it meant to be a Parisian or a Londoner during this turbulent time. Looking specifically at the period between 1830 and 1850 – a period when, according to Joan Scott, "the lines of social affiliation were being redrawn" – I consider how the popular print cultures of Paris and London took stock of their respective urban panoramas and peopled them with recognizable figures that "said things" about city life (65).[7] So while earlier writers (like Louis-Sébastien Mercier in the late eighteenth-century Paris or Pierce Egan in London of the 1820s) turned a critical and categorizing gaze upon urban life in order to document the growing metropolis and are, therefore, literary predecessors to the authors I consider, these texts were not produced in the same environment of collective urban self-analysis. Moreover, the 1830s, 40s, and 50s saw a massive growth of the reading public (as literacy rates increased and circulation numbers of popular

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[6] See, David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 93-97, and Eric E. Lampard, "The Urbanizing World," *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, Ed. H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff (London: Routledge, 1973) 1:3-6.

[7] The social types I consider were, by and large, a product of this very specific historical period (one which is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1).

newspapers and journals soared), so that the urban literature produced in this period necessarily helped shape the way this space was experienced by contemporaries.

Since the cities that shaped and showcased grisettes and sempstresses were produced within the constructed domain of print culture, I wish to make it clear that I am not discussing actual women in the "real" cities of Paris and London. That it not to say, however, that the texts and images I examine do not express some element of truth about the nineteenth-century city and its inhabitants. I approach these documents, however, as subjective snapshots that join – or contradict – the numerous other voices that attempted to describe and define the shared urban environment. The articulated city is necessarily polyvocal according to urban theorist Raymond Ledrut who inquires, "who is going to speak, then, through the city? Undoubtedly speakers have existed, but they are authors only of fragments of the city, and sometimes we can detect in the urban elements or in an aspect of the city the presence of many speakers whose words are superimposed or even interfering."[8] Indeed, even within a single text, one can find various voices speaking in a variety of social registers for, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, "authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized)."[9] Even texts that claim authoritative knowledge of the city, in other words, offer more than pure description as they inevitably

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[8] Raymond Ledrut, "Speech and the Silence of the City," *The City and the Sign: An Introduction to Urban Semiotics*, Ed. M. Gottdiener and Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 119.
[9] M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 263.

contain counter-discursive elements (humor, irony, exaggeration) that destabilize the very structures of classification that allow one to decode the urban environment and classify people as types.

While the metaphor of a speaking city allows one to account for the numerous – and occasionally conflicting – urban narratives that purported to exemplify the metropolitan experience, any consideration of the city produced by print culture must also confront the voyeurism of an increasingly specular society. It was through the faculty of sight that the nineteenth-century urbanite hoped to understand – and thus dominate – the city and first impressions based upon fleeting encounters epitomized the social relations that were produced within urban print culture. In this space of revolving social scenery, city dwellers learned to size up one another with a single glance. Early urban theorists – such as Georg Simmel and Louis Wirth – identified this cursory glance thrown upon passing strangers as a communicative tool mandated by city life. Any attempt to scratch below the surface of appearance, they argued, was impossible due to the psychological strain produced by the constant exposure to so many people and places on a daily basis.[10] One consequence of this vision-centrism was that, in the eyes of strangers, people *were* what they appeared to be. Dress, then, became a key feature used to categorize city dwellers, according to Wirth, who states that "we see the uniform which denotes the role of the functionaries and are oblivious to the personal eccentricities

[10] Indeed, the city dweller not only avoids too great an intimacy with strangers but experiences an aversion to them, according to Simmel, so that "…the metropolitan type – which naturally takes on a thousand individual modifications – creates a protective organ for itself against the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it." Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," *On Individuality and Social Forms*, Ed. Donald Levine, Trans. Edward A. Shils. 1903 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1971) 326.

that are hidden behind the uniform."[11] The "uniforms" of grisettes and sempstresses were particularly salient to the extent that the positioning of a certain kind of cap, or a woebegone flowerpot spied in an apartment window, was enough to signify a working woman in the popular imagination.[12] The city's spotlight on visual appearances thus hid more problematic considerations such as the economic vulnerability and growing discontent of these aestheticized workers.

Another more nefarious side of this vision-centrism is, of course, the fact that, as people increasingly equated looking with knowing, the city became a site of surveillance. If strangers were potentially threatening and appearances were largely revealing, city dwellers would have approached the visual profiling of passers-by as a form of self-protection. Considering the way in which surveillance changed – as the eye of the central authority figure was replaced (or supplemented) by many eyes from within the populace itself – Michel Foucault describes this mania for a disciplinary (or controlling) gaze as a feature embedded in within the social fabric.[13] This new form of looking is, according to Foucault, closely tied in to the population and economic growth of the city:

> si le décollage économique de l'Occident a commencé avec les procédés qui ont permis l'accumulation du capital, on peut dire, peut-être, que les méthodes pour gérer l'accumulation des hommes ont permis un décollage politique par rapport à des formes de pouvoir traditionnelles, rituelles, coûteuses, violentes, et qui, bientôt tombées en désuétude, ont été relayées par toute une technologie fine et calculée de l'assujettissement. (222)

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[11] Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," *The American Journal of Sociology* 44.1 (1938): 14.
[12] Whereas a uniform physical appearance – particularly in relation to dress – was standard among French grisettes, British seamstresses were noted for their identical interiors complete with some visual signifier of rural origins. I discuss the differences between these two working types in greater detail below.
[13] See Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975) 213.

It is difficult, in other words, to talk about the voyeurism inherent in the nineteenth-century city without referring to the population and economic growth that made such ocular invasiveness possible and, indeed, profitable. The causality between the economic and social experiences of urbanity has informed numerous urban studies scholars who view the cityscape from a Marxist perspective and emphasize the role capitalist modes of production play in shaping the city. Influenced by this reading of the city as a space produced by struggles and negotiations between producers and consumers, I have nevertheless chosen to view urban seamstresses from a slightly different perspective as I focus less on issues of labor and more on questions of representation. That is to say that although classed (and gendered) bodies were shuttled through the city in very real and space-altering ways, the focus of my investigation is less on the *process* of working-class surveillance and more on the *products* of it, namely the invented working-class seamstress and the spaces she inhabited within the popular literature of the 1830s – 1850s.

While writers and social commentators insisted that seeing was tantamount to knowing, the literary texts I examine prove that observation was more often than not an act of imagination. Detached from his surroundings, the nineteenth-century on-looker sought privacy in crowds that, according to Richard Sennett, inspired him to turn inward rather than reach out to others: "the silent spectator with no one in particular to watch, shielded by his right to be left alone, could now also be absolutely in his own thoughts, his daydreams; paralyzed from a sociable point of view, his consciousness could float

free."[14] Paris and London, then, were not just being obsessively *written* during the nineteenth century, I argue, but compulsively *rewritten* on the blank slate of city streets where everyday dramas were enacted and observed. As the citizens on the street went about their routines, they composed urban texts that were, according to Michel de Certeau, both writer-less and reader-less: "the networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other."[15] While writers who wish to make the urban text visible usually adopt a bird's eye view of the city, French and British artists and authors of the 1830s to 1850s invested these fragments of everyday life with the same import usually reserved for grand spectacles. Making regular people and mundane scenes metonymic stand-ins for the greater metropolis, mid-century print culture turned the everyday into the emblematic and, in doing so, compromised the temporary, transient, and idiosyncratic nature of this everyday life. While urban crowds and the spaces they filled were inherently unpredictable, the rhetorical gestures performed by urban literature flattened the cityscape in order to create a legible (and therefore uniform) map of city space.

While crowds were meaningful – if disorganized – agents affecting the city, they only ever constituted ephemeral fragments of everyday life until observed and immortalized by artists and authors of the period. City dwellers, in other words, may have

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[14] Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism* (New York: Random House, 1974) 217.
[15] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984) 93.

left their mark upon the spaces they crossed or inhabited but this interplay between people and places does not really become visible until one turns to the pages (or prints) of urban literature. By dramatizing the social interactions fostered by various city spaces, this literature actually acted upon and affected those spaces as the textualization of the nineteenth-century city did not merely reproduce urban space in literature but, rather, helped shape the city it sought to describe. Looking at the role of verbal and visual sketches in the construction of what Henri Lefebvre has dubbed "social space," I consider how these documents – by reflecting a socially coherent image of the city – ended up creating spaces of legibility through their widely-disseminated system of codes. Social space is, according to Lefebvre, both a product and producer of the city: as "itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others."[16] Considering the social space produced by a literature obsessed with putting people in their places or, quite literally, with inventing figures produced by the exigencies of a changing urban environment, I maintain that such spaces attempt to make social hierarchies visible and, therefore, self-evident. This attempt to render social relations decipherable and predictable betrays, of course, the fact that urban social dynamics were confusing and often hard to read.[17] Through its invention of new types and ossification of old stereotypes, urban literature locked people into limited and legible roles and can therefore be read as an agent of both stasis and change in the city.

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[16] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991) 73.

[17] The social confusion particular to the nineteenth century is discussed further in Chapter 1.

Producing Working Women

Women, according to most critics and commentators, were excluded from city life and could therefore not participate in the experience of modernity.[18] While more recent feminist scholars have convincingly reinserted these missing women back into the city (from which, of course, they were never truly absent), I consider the ways in which working women's hypervisibility within the cityscape turned them into avatars of a new form of public participation.[19] On display with popular print culture as coquettish or, conversely, overworked and languishing bodies, these women were overshadowed by the people who looked at, and reacted to, them. I argue, then, that seamstresses were, on one hand, public figures only insofar as they embodied a predictable *to-be-looked-at-ness* that reassured on-lookers of their own dominance over city space.[20] In other words, if the women who made, cared for, and sold clothing filled the pages of urban literature, they were, more often than not, featured as conduits for a spectator's experience of the city. On the other hand, these women were granted an exceptional amount of freedom and mobility largely denied to other women and workers, and they were thus capable of enjoying a diverse array of urban experiences. Because the depictions of these women

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[18] See Janet Wolff, "The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 2.3 (1985).

[19] Looking, for example, at the role bourgeois women played in the shaping of London's shopping culture, Erika Rappaport shows that even the supposedly sheltered women enjoyed access to city space. *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000).

[20] In her seminal essay on women and the male gaze, Laura Mulvey argues that films are constructed in such a way as to show the spectator how to look at women (by identifying with the gazing male protagonists). Her concept of *to-be-looked-at-ness* can easily be applied to the urban literature I discuss since readers "see" as directed by the narrating voice. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford UP, 1999) 837.

were hedged in by rigid codes of legibility, however, they were necessarily limited to their specific roles as grisettes or sempstresses. So, in spite of their constant movement and promising mobility, these were inherently static figures locked into their limited roles. That is to say that, as they circulated within the city, they did so as a certain type of woman (rather than as anonymous agents) and the predictability implied by this view of them as a predetermined type assured viewers of their own relative freedom vis-à-vis the cityscape.

While both French grisettes and British sempstresses were turned into types that seemed to lend a certain degree of predictability and legibility to the spaces they occupied, they were otherwise very different figures that elicited dissimilar reactions amongst their spectators. While writers of *physiologies* and urban guides were seemingly obsessed with coming up with a definition of the grisette, the term was often used to designate any working-class girl, particularly those with ties to the garment trade. Grisettes were uniquely Parisian according to Jules Janin who, in the encyclopedic tome *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes*, associates them with the city, stating that "de tous les produits parisiens, le produit le plus parisien sans contredit, c'est la grisette."[21] Produced by their urban milieu, these women also reflected it for, according to Honoré de Balzac, "elle personnifie trop bien Paris, auquel elle fournit des portieres édentées, des laveuses de linge, des balayeueses, des mendiantes, parfois des comtesses impertinentes, des actrices admirées, des cantatrices applaudies; elle a même donné jadis quasi-reines à

[21] Jules Janin, "La grisette," *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* 8 vols. (Paris: Curmer, 1843) 1:10.

la monarchie."[22] Significantly, the grisette cannot seem to remain one for any great length of time as she embodies the concept of urban mobility in literal and figurative ways.[23] Lighthearted and carefree, the grisette created by popular literature lived in the now without dwelling on past hardships or future uncertainties. Their "now" was but a brief moment, however, and, as Balzac explains, these women inevitably found themselves either sliding down or shooting up the social ladder. The grisette, then, is an essentially optimistic character making her way through a city that cannot sustain this hope in an enduring present.[24] While Balzac acknowledges the instability of the grisette's idealized identity, most other authors and artists chose merely to enshrine this figure as a perfect city dweller able to seek pleasure everywhere, from the bare garrets that housed them to the bacchanal parties in the outlying suburbs that occupied their scant free time. Through their voyeuristic possession of the grisette, consumers of popular print culture could believe, howsoever briefly, in Paris as a site that, rather than being (literally) torn between the inadequate structures of the past and the incomplete monuments of the future, found itself suspended in a timeless present.

If the grisette was a cheerful and heartening figure that infused readers with an optimistic sense of the city's possibilities, the British sempstress was, in quite an opposite vein, an urban martyr who suffered the consequences of the city's pursuit of pleasure. Often depicted both verbally and visually as a lonely figure toiling away in a candle-lit

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[22] Honoré de Balzac, *Ferragus* 1833 (St. Peter Port, Guernsey: Dodo Press, 2006) 55.

[23] This is particularly true in the case of Ida Gruget, Balzac's grisette who drowns herself after her interference in her lover's personal life causes him to break with her. No longer a source of pleasure, she ceases to be a stereotypical grisette and, ultimately, just ceases to be.

[24] As old Paris was being torn down to accommodate the city's growth, both the past and the future asserted themselves onto city dwellers in a visceral way. The grisette's ability to capture the now in this climate of nostalgia and frenzied excitement would have contributed to her widespread appeal.

garret above a sleeping London, the sempstress used out her body to enhance the wealth of the men who employed her and the beauty of the women who donned the dresses she made. The sempstress's city was one of impoverished garrets, pawnshops, and the grave, but – since the articles she made were often pictured as extensions of herself – she was inscribed into the prosperous clothing emporiums and glamorous ballrooms as well. A source of discomfort, the sempstress was an icon of reproach against the rich who used her and against the poor who could not, or would not, emulate her example. If the grisette provided a brief respite from the Paris of the past and the new Paris of progress, the sempstress was an equally interstitial figure negotiating the gap between a splendid and squalid London. Rather than belonging to both spaces she belonged to neither. In "The Dress-Maker" (1840), his otherwise unoriginal description of this figure, Douglas Jerrold stressed the sempstress's lack of origins and belonging when he asks "Is there a more helpless, a more forlorn and unprotected, creature than, in nine cases out of ten, the Dress-Maker's Girl—the Daily Sempstress; pushed prematurely from the parental hearth, or rather no hearth, to win her miserable crust by aching fingers?"[25] With this "no hearth" as her point of departure into the city, the sempstress occupied an urban nowhere so that her spectators could more fully appreciate their own relative belonging. In a city, in other words, where social and economic statuses were fluid and constantly subject to change, the sempstress was a reminder that any place was better than none at all.

Cheerful or grim, seamstresses were types closely associated with the city but they nevertheless made spectators look within themselves rather out onto the world

[25] Douglas Jerrold, "The Dress Maker," *Heads of the People: Portraits of the English* (London: Robert Tyas, 1840) 1.

around them. One could then argue that these women became lost to view as observers gazed upon them but only managed to see a reflection of themselves. When they did become the focus of attention, these working women were often seen as emblematic examples of what the city could do to single women. Whether one was concerned with the lax morals of grisettes or the consumptive bodies of sempstresses, commentators saw both depravity and disease as marks of the city on the body of women.[26] Branded by the city, these urban figures were necessarily modern. Looking at Edgar Degas's images of laundresses, Eunice Lipton points out a contradiction between the subject matter (laboring women) and their articulation, arguing that these figures "are at odds with modernity, but modernity is their voice."[27] Something similar is at work in the images of seamstresses. While sewing women would seem to evoke a tradition of feminine domestic labor, fictionalized grisettes and sempstresses were relatively new (and potentially disturbing) figures as their work turned them into highly visible public figures upon the urban panorama.[28] If the nineteenth-century woman's place was (howsoever problematically) the home, these seamstresses were decidedly out of place or else not "real" women.[29] Indeed, this problem of female labor disturbed the very writers who

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[26] While the marks of depravity and disease would normally indicate that one is dealing with unsavory characters (such as the urban prostitute), seamstresses were most often positively valorized by the literature depicting them.

[27] Eunice Lipton, *Looking into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986) 149.

[28] While sewing might initially represent domestic female labor *par excellence*, it was only in the late eighteenth century that this work became so closely associated with women. For more on the feminization of professional sewing, see Jennifer Jones, *Sexing la mode: Gender, Fashion, and Commercial Culture in Old Regime France* (New York: Berg, 2004) 96.

[29] Statesman Jules Simon argued that women who worked outside the home forfeited their femininity, stating "c'est que la femme, devenue ouvrière, n'est plus une femme." Jules Simon, *L'Ouvrière* (Paris: Hachette, 1861) vi.

celebrated the grisette and sempstress as a type, so, in order to resolve the ontological impossibility posed by working women, the authors I consider turned their workers into wives and transplanted them into the private space of the home. This domestic containment not only reinstated the city as a space dominated and defined by men, but, by taking these workers out of circulation, it also circumscribed the interstitial spaces opened up by these figures within the urban environment. If authors attempted to masculinize the city through matrimony, however, there was always – according to all accounts of nineteenth-century female labor – an army of working women ready to replace the worker-wives. Indeed, it was this endless supply of willing workers that rendered the French grisettes and British sempstresses perpetually young and essentially piquant figures peopling the cityscape.

Seamstresses and Narratives of City Life

Looking at how working women – grisettes and sempstresses – "said things" about the city (and the place of women within it), I examine how they were invented as a type within the panoramic literature of the 1830s and 40s.[30] I then consider how later authors adopted (and adapted) these clichéd figures as they too turned their gaze upon the city.[31] While based on real urban figures (who posed very real problems in both Paris and

[30] There is, of course, a tradition of viewing women as embodiments of urban life. Looking at the role that single women – or *femmes isolées* – played in the city, Scott argues that they "represented the domain of poverty, a world of turbulent sexuality, subversive independence, and dangerous insubordination. They embodied the city itself" (147).

[31] Occasionally these "later" authors are in fact the ones who helped invent the types in the earlier panoramic literature. Charles Dickens, for example, depicted the city (and its types) first in his fragmentary series of urban vignettes *Sketches by Boz* (1839) and then later in his more expansive novels, such as *Bleak House* (1853) and *Little Dorrit* (1855-57).

London), these fictional grisettes and idealized sempstresses can be hard to read today since they express – and repress – social truths. This ambiguity is due to their composite origins according to Lynn Alexander who states that "like all created characters, the seamstress cannot be said to point to any 'real' worker; inevitably each portrait is created from a synthesis of social knowledge, social desires, documentary material, and literary and aesthetic convention" (209). This study, while of course cognizant of the other components making up the working woman's portrait, examines these social desires and looks at why representations of these women veered so quickly from the realm of social inquiry into one of urban fantasy.

Part of the answer to that question lies in their very status as workers who, because they sold their labor, might potentially sell their bodies. The mere possibility of sexual deviance (or availability) had consequences, as Griselda Pollock argues, since "any conjunction of woman and work immediately precipitated both into the domain of sexuality, making the working woman's body the object of regulatory surveillance, itself the condition for an erotic curiosity often verging on sexual abuse."[32] This overt sexualization of seamstresses complicates the distinction between the "working women" and "working girls" of the nineteenth century.[33] Indeed, when looking at women as emblems of modernity, most critics look not to seamstresses but, rather, to prostitutes, since as Deborah Epstein Nord argues

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[32] Griselda Pollock, "The Dangers of Proximity: The Spaces of Sexuality and Surveillance in Word and Image," *Discourse* 16.2 (1993/1994): 13.

[33] This is particularly true to the fact that unmarried women who lived with male partners were also considered prostitutes throughout the nineteenth century.

> She could stand variously as an emblem of social suffering or debasement, as a projection of or analogue to the male stroller's alienated self, as an instrument of pleasure and a partner in urban sprees, as a rhetorical and symbolic means of isolating and quarantining urban ills in the midst of an otherwise buoyant metropolis, or as an agent of connection and contamination.[34]

While prostitutes are often perceived as female counterparts to the male *flâneur*, I propose looking at seamstresses as analogues to these urban types in that they too are fictional embodiments of a particular narrative about city life that was continuously repeated within popular print culture. Unlike these more salient urban figures, however, the fictionalized seamstress was both formed by the city and yet untouched (or, rather, uncorrupted) by it. Moreover, for urban types, they were surprisingly domesticated and, from their *mansardes* in Paris and garrets in London, they were positioned – both spatially and morally – above the teeming cities below. So, unlike more self-serving urban types, the grisettes and sempstresses of urban literature constituted an idealized figure that, for all its faults, stood as a model for those who wished to be both of the city and above it.

The first section, "The Panoramic City," considers the way in which verbal and visual representations of particular urban spaces shaped readers' (and viewers') perceptions of the city. So as the seamstress emerged as a type within popular print culture, she was indelibly tied to the spaces in which she was staged. Chapter 1 looks at the rise of urban guides in the 1830s – 1850s in France and England and maps the seamstress onto these textual spaces. Looking at the way in which the seamstress was

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[34] Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995) 2-3.

framed as a private *and* public figure, this chapter, moreover, analyzes the extent to which the seamstress's living space was incorporated into the larger city and made open to the gaze of urban observers. Focusing on the specific space of Paris's Latin Quarter, Chapter 2 traces the evolution of the grisette, as she leaves behind her identity as a worker in order to adopt the role as artist's muse. While a source of inspiration – and indeed the catalyst behind the great art produced by men – the grisette is only ever a nostalgic figure, representing the left-behind time and space of the artist's youth.

In the second section, "The Mysterious City," I look at how, as the city grew – both spatially and in population – it was increasingly imagined as a labyrinthine space, which eluded all attempts to read or decode it. Chapter 3 investigates how Eugène Sue, in his 1843-44 *Les Mystères de Paris*, depicts a Paris full of masked figures that have, for all practical purposes, become their disguises. This ability to reinvent the self – for good or for evil – breaks down, however, when it comes to the bodies of working women. Considering the treatment of Rigolette, a grisette, and La Goualeuse, a seamstress-turned-prostitute, this chapter argues that Sue exiles women workers from the city in an effort to protect them from those who control (and corrupt) the urban environment. Chapter 4 turns to a labyrinthine London and considers how the working women in novels by G. W. M. Reynolds and Charles Dickens succeed (or fail) in domesticating pockets of urban space. The only kind of woman who thrives in the city, according to both Reynolds and Dickens, is the kept-woman (whether the illegitimate mistress or infinitely more respectable wife or daughter) and this chapter considers the consequences of insisting upon the city as a site of danger for women.

A new perspective emerges in the final section, "The New Vision of the City," with Chapter 5 focusing on the feminist poetics of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Ending "Aurora Leigh" with the eponymous heroine proposing to build a New Jerusalem peopled with working women, Barrett Browning essentially calls for a rewriting of the city along more visionary – and less exploitative – lines. Like the cities depicted in all the texts and images discussed, this is, of course, only ever a fictional – and, indeed, impossibly idealized – space, but it is still one that stands out for the way in which it imagines a place for the seamstress (as well as all other workers) within it.

PART 1: *THE PANORAMIC CITY*

Chapter 1: Cityscapes, Seamstresses, and the Problem of Visibility

Defining the grisette for readers of the multi-authored, encyclopedic survey of French types *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* (1840-43), Jules Janin asserts that, to understand this female working-class figure, one has only to look at her: "La seule façon de comprendre ce monde des grisettes parisiennes, monde à part dans le monde, c'est de le voir de près."[1] Janin nevertheless accommodates those readers who might not have access to this particular view of Paris by providing a detailed description of all that an observer would witness when trailing a grisette from her impoverished *mansarde* to her place of employment. As the nineteenth-century Parisian panorama emerges from the collected vignettes of this celebrated text, the city takes shape as a series of spectacles staged to introduce emblematic types to an audience positioned, not as readers but, rather, as urban observers. Indeed, as the authors and artists of urban literature embraced the modernity of the fleeting encounters between city dwellers, they simultaneously defined new practices of looking for as Jonathan Crary states, "modernity is inseparable from on one hand a remaking of the observer, and on the other a proliferation of circulating signs

[1] Jules Janin, "La Grisette," *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* 8 vols. (Paris: Curmer, 1843) 1: 10.

and objects whose effects coincide with their visuality."[2] Under the watchful eye of these observers, the French grisettes and British sempstresses of popular literature were incorporated into the spectacle of modern life and, although they constituted one type among many, they enjoyed a unique position upon the urban panoramas of the nineteenth century. Indeed, based on the repeated commands to follow, witness, or otherwise intercept the seamstress in various urban sketches like *Les Français*, I argue that these women were poised as conduits to a sector of the city that could only be accessed through art or literature. Analyzing the seamstress and the city she inhabits – "ce monde des grisettes parisiennes" – as they come into focus within the pages of nineteenth-century urban literature, this chapter investigates how representations of French grisettes and British sempstresses constructed recognizable urban types that, in turn, gave rise to distinctive (albeit imaginary) spaces within Paris and London.[3]

The grisette was necessarily a worker, but, as Janin's description illustrates, she was rarely described at work. Indeed, it is not through needles, thread, or the other paraphernalia of her trade that she is immediately recognized but, rather, by her very presence, according to Janin, in the streets of Paris: "Sortez le matin par un beau jour qui commence, et regardez autour de vous quelle est la première femme éveillée dans ce riche Paris qui dort encore: c'est la grisette!" (1: 10). While fictional grisettes were often ambulatory figures guiding readers through the streets of an idealized Parisian bohemia, London's sempstresses were situated not in – but above – the city. From their bare

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[2] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990) 11.

[3] The differences and similarities between grisettes and sempstresses (and the urban niches they filled) are discussed further below.

garrets, these ethereal (and overworked) sempstresses looked down upon the sleeping city below and invited readers to follow their gaze from this superior vantage point. If seeing a woman upon a Parisian street or in a London garret was nearly enough to identify a seamstress in the popular print culture of the 1830s – 1850s, it is nevertheless true that these women possessed other signifying attributes that enabled the knowing urban observer to decode them. Indeed, as the grisettes or sempstresses of urban panoramic literature increasingly accumulated legible signs of work upon their bodies, the visual and verbal representations of them began to reproduce these identical traits, to the extent that it became difficult to distinguish between the numerous portraits of these women [figure 1.1]. This sketch, for example, by French artist Gavarni initially appears to resist identification: with her back turned to the viewer, the woman seems staged as an anonymous stranger. The clear presence of identifying features – the hatbox and the cap – is sufficient to label her as a grisette. As types, in other words, the grisette and sempstress were reduced to the objects that signified their profession (and, subsequently, their urban identities) to the attentive viewer. Panoramic literature thus required people to look at *things* while frequently ignoring, or losing sight of, the bigger urban picture.

The surplus of seamstresses upon the panoramas of Paris and London undoubtedly reflects the record numbers of women pouring into the major urban centers of France and England during the same time period. While the majority of these women sought employment "in service" as maids and cooks, many looked to support themselves by sewing, which afforded more freedom (as they were not forced to "live in") while simultaneously exposing them to the pleasures and perils of city life. Due to the nature of

Figure 1.1 Gavarni, *Physiologie de la grisette* 1841 (Paris: Ressources, 1979): 88.

their work – which was associated with stereotypical notions of femininity and could, therefore, be construed as "genteel" – seamstresses (particularly those in London) captured the popular imagination as picturesque victims of capitalism and urbanization.[4] While literary critics and art historians have thoroughly examined these figures for the pathos they evoked, I choose to focus on the implications of their hyper-visibility upon the cityscape and within the city's print culture. Less interested, then, in the women who flocked to the city in search of work, I focus on the grisettes and sempstresses saturating the pages of popular journals, newspapers, and novels. Indeed, these omnipresent women

[4] Seamstresses were sympathetic working-class figures and therefore could appeal to a large readership. See Lynn M. Alexander, *Women, Work, and Representation: Needlewomen in Victorian Art and Literature* (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2003) 1.

owed their visibility, in part, to their fluidity vis-à-vis the urban text. Equally represented in new stories and narratives – in social surveys or the city sketch – seamstresses were endlessly reproduced as urban landmarks. While seamstresses were, to a certain extent, products of their urban milieux, I look to the rare representations of sempstresses at work to further explore how this figure in turn shaped how writers, artists, and readers thought about and envisioned the city.

City Sketches, Urban Types, and the Creation of the Seamstress

Coming to terms with the modernity of the nineteenth-century city, urbanites turned to new forms of sociability as they tried to make sense of the people and places surrounding them. For example, as the new omnibuses of Paris and London shortened the distances between urban landmarks, passengers felt the city shrinking around them even as the number of people they encountered on a daily basis grew larger. While, on one hand, it was an undeniably alienating experience, this modern mode of transportation was experienced as a way to access both the city and its inhabitants, for, as Charles Dickens observed, "each person gazes vacantly through the window in front of him, and every body thinks that his opposite neighbor is staring at him."[5] These two activities – crossing the city and examining the people who inhabit it – thus seemed to go hand in hand as cheap transport opened up urban space, throwing city dwellers into unfamiliar places and amongst unfamiliar people. While omnibus riders probably wished to avoid being caught staring, looking at people and places was a pastime popularized by the literary sketch and

[5] Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz* 1839 (London: Penguin, 1995) 170.

the urban survey, two popular literary forms made prominent in the early half of the century. These fragmentary texts were, according to Elizabeth Wilson, perfectly suited to capturing the changing city: "what distinguishes great city life from rural existence is that we constantly brush against strangers; we observe bits of the 'stories' men and women carry with them, but never learn their conclusions; life ceases to form itself into epic or narrative, becoming instead a short story, dreamlike, insubstantial or ambiguous."[6] Endorsing this transformation of random strangers into legible types (replete with predictable stories), the new urban literature anticipated the pattern of social interactions in the big – and largely anonymous – city.

City guides, sketches, and other panoramic *tableaux* popular during the early half of the century constructed versions of Paris and London that were intensely textual and, at best, problematically legible.[7] According to these urban narratives, parks, promenades, and, of course, passers-by constituted the sign system of the city even as they eluded easy interpretation through a multitude of possible meanings. For all its readability, in other words, any codes attached to the city are inherently unreliable as different social groups attach different meanings to various spaces and urban phenomena. Moreover, according to Raymond Williams, the ever-expanding populations of Paris and London contributed to the difficulty in stabilizing meaning in the city: "the growth of towns and especially of

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[6] Elizabeth Wilson, "The Invisible *Flâneur*," *New Left Review* 191 (1992): 107.

[7] The term "panoramic literature" was coined by Walter Benjamin, who compared French *feuilletons* with popular dioramas and panoramas, both in terms of content and form. *The Arcades Project*, Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999) 531. I expand the concept of panoramic literature to include the social surveys that were influenced by governmental studies on the "social question" and were, therefore, more serious – and authoritative – in tone. The literary and social importance of these texts has been thoroughly addressed by critics, namely Richard Sieburth, who looks at the cultural significance of French *physiologies*, and Alison Byerly, who investigates the role of the sketch in British literature.

cities and a metropolis; the increasing division and complexity of labour; the altered and critical relations between and within social classes: in changes like these any assumption of a knowable community – a whole community, wholly knowable – became harder and harder to sustain."[8] With continuous migration into the cities, entire neighborhoods were literally changing overnight, creating a sense of bewilderment and insecurity for the inhabitants of these areas. Indeed, such instability became the hallmark of the early nineteenth-century for, as Richard Terdiman states, "the theme and the dominant social experience of this period is a massive displacement of individuals and of whole social structures within which their existences are determined."[9] Suddenly, or so some social commentators argued, these displaced structures needed to be stabilized so that the urban citizen could make sense of the new social universe and his place within it.

The sense of lost bearings so prevalent during this time of transformation found recourse in the literary genre created in response to it. Narrated from the urban trenches, so to speak, this literature relied on the conceit of a reporting observer who describes and decodes the idiosyncratic cast of characters found in public spaces.[10] Often embodied as the French *flâneur* or the more authoritative social scientist, these observers typically

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[8] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973) 165. During the first half of the century, the populations of Paris and London doubled and tripled respectively, according to Lees (1: 414).

[9] Richard Terdiman, *Discourse / Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985) 93.

[10] When I use the term *flâneur*, I mean the urban observer in a broad sense – he is at once the author of frivolous urban guides and the serious surveys that consider the question of urban poverty. That the nineteenth-century city, and Paris in particular, needed such a figure to render it legible to contemporaries is perhaps due, in part, to the fact that he was both the author (or creator) of types and a type himself for, according to historian Mary Gluck, "he rose above the fragmented world of social types and became a culture archetype, with access to the totality of urban culture, unavailable to other characters. The flâneur, in fact, was the only figure in Parisian popular culture who could render the labyrinthine urban landscape legible and meaningful to contemporaries." *Popular Bohemia: Modernism and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005) 75.

extolled their own ability to *see* when others could only *look*. Gleaning insight from superficial appearances, these observers found meaning in the objects of everyday life and used these banal, but apparently coded, items of clothing and accessories to "read" the social status and position of passers-by. Elevating the ephemeral and frivolous in order to imbue them with signifying power, these observers zoomed in on the details and, consequentially, often lost sight of the bigger urban picture. Because these observers were turning real life into narrative, they could, according to Susan Buck-Morss, produce an idealized or fictional view of city space: "On the boulevards, the flaneur, now jostled by crowds and in full view of the urban poverty which inhabited public streets, could maintain a rhapsodic view of modern existence only with the aid of illusion, which is just what the literature of flanerie -- physiognomies, novels of the crowd -- was produced to provide."[11] Even the more serious works of social and economic inquiry conducted by commentators such as the British journalist Henry Mayhew or the French statesman Jules Simon perpetuated this vision of intriguing (rather than depressed) urban squalor by addressing the modern city dweller as someone hungry for – because inherently attracted to or charmed by – the invisible underbelly of the metropolis.[12] The poor sections of the city, for example, were often depicted as exotic locales – in the vein of James Fenimore Cooper's descriptions of Native American populations in the United States – inspiring curious (and privileged) visitors to tour the slums with knowledgeable guides, although most people were content to read about the "other half" in the comfort and safety of their

[11] Susan Buck-Morss, "The Flaneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering," *New German Critique: An Interdisciplinary Journal of German Studies* 39 (1986): 103.
[12] This tendency to render lower-class populations as objects of curiosity is explored further in Chapter 2.

homes. As they conflated visible urban features with knowable social differences, the writer-observers built theories around the physical details of person and place and reduced them to metonymic signifiers that captured the urban whole.

City dwellers undoubtedly found visual identifications useful, but this turn toward surveillance in the name of social legibility had profound consequences for how all women were viewed, as visually available women were most often perceived as sexually available women. So even as print culture endorsed the ability of visible signifiers to codify social difference, a woman's presence upon the city's streets was enough to reduce her to a state of questionable respectability. Moreover, as the price of clothing decreased and heralded a so-called "democratization of dress," women looked more and more alike and it became difficult to distinguish between different types of women based on sight alone.[13] It was, in fact, this sort of confusion that fostered the massive popularity of panoramic literature, which claimed to decipher or elucidate true natures behind even the most neutral facades. Indeed, the ambiguity of all women upon public thoroughfares was a consistent theme in urban literature, which typically staged the circulating woman as a "problem" for the male observer rather than as a legitimate urban observer in her own right. Indeed, according to critic Judith Walkowitz, women were doubly powerless, as they were denied both interpretive ability and control over the meanings expressed by

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[13] As women from all classes adopted the same styles throughout the nineteenth century, social commentators dramatized the possible confusion that could arise from being unable to visually distinguish between respectable and disreputable women. According to Jennifer Jones, this difficulty in distinguishing between different types of women was largely groundless. Jennifer Jones, *Sexing la mode: Gender, Fashion, and Commercial Culture in Old Regime France* (New York: Berg, 2004) 212. While Jones argues that a duchess always stood out among fishmongers, later urban observers feared less the dissimulating power of fish sellers and more the economic prowess of courtesans who could afford the fashionable attire – and who actually started the fashions – adopted by upper-class women.

their own bodies: "in the mental map of urban spectators, they lacked autonomy: they were bearers of meaning rather than makers of meaning. As symbols of conspicuous display or of lower-class and sexual disorder, they occupied a multivalent symbolic position in this imaginary landscape."[14] While this assumption of female powerlessness is a bit overstated, it is true that writing male observers took advantage of the ambivalent status of women outside the home by emphasizing their unique – and apparently socially useful – ability to gauge respectability. Depicting the street-crowd as a heterogeneous mix of people from all walks of life, these professional people-watchers made careers out of confusion by claiming to distinguish between the high and the low, or the respectable and reproachable.

Urban guides and panoramic texts were, for the most part, narrated by men for men. Women played a compromised role in these voyeuristic accounts of the city and were further limited by their inability to look (or write) back, for even when women authored vignettes or chapters of these urban texts, they frequently adopted the masculine voice of the narrating *flâneur*. Although the existence of a female *flâneuse* would have challenged this gendered looking, such women were exceptional – and definitely not from the working-class – during the early half of the nineteenth century.[15] If women were not recognized observers of urban life, it is because, as Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson argues, their access to nondomestic spaces was restricted: "the flâneur's movement

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[14] Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992) 21.

[15] See Catherine Nesci, *Le Flâneur et les flâneuses: Les femmes et la ville à l'époque romantique* (Grenoble: ELLUG, 2007), and her discussion of exceptional female writers (Girardan, Sand, and Tristan) who appropriate *flânerie* for their own authorial ends. See also Erika Rappaport and her discussion of a fin-de-siècle *flâneuse*, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000) 6.

within the city, like his solitude, points to a privileged status. But because a woman is defined by the (male) company she keeps, to be alone is to be without station. Mobility renders her suspect."[16] Women, therefore, were easily looked-upon as spectacles on display in urban literature, but they made only questionable on-lookers, at best. For all their problematic passivity, however, women were not mute ornaments decorating the cityscape, and seamstresses, in particular, were regularly depicted in such a way that challenged the quick assumptions of those familiar with her as a type.

With regular appearances in French and British panoramic texts, the seamstress was a relatively realistic figure who – in narrative if not in real life – inhabited romanticized spaces within the city. Although a decidedly working-class figure, she transcended the proletarian sectors of Paris and London and instead evoked the "higher" and more abstract spheres of art, purity, or idealism. Her role in the urban guides and city sketches was therefore not to provide insight into the conditions of working-class neighborhoods but, rather, to promote the fantasies of the authors and artists who peopled their renditions of Paris and London with these clearly fictional types. French grisettes, for instance, were the necessary muses that transformed the dingy lodgings of the Latin Quarter into the artful bohemia of literature while British sempstresses set her spectators dreaming of a pre-urban existence in an idealized English countryside. As clichéd stock figures in urban texts, however, seamstresses were – somewhat unexpectedly – a source of surprise for those who made the mistake of underestimating them. Indeed, unlike the

[16] Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, *Paris as Revolution: Writing the Nineteenth-Century City* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994) 84. Working women were, of course, free to circulate about the city but since they were, at least in the French accounts, barely literate, they would not have been reliable narrators of urban life.

other common types associated with urban life – such as the flâneur or prostitute – these women regularly suppressed their own (monetary or social) self-interest to promote the greater good. That said, they also challenge certain assumptions one could make regarding their relative powerlessness vis-à-vis the shaping of urban institutions. The Parisian art world, for example, may treat grisettes as mere accessories to illustrious male artists with whom they are associated, but literary grisettes are regularly described as artists in their own right, creating fashionable apparel whose sphere of influence is at least as great (if not greater) than that of their lovers'. And Victorian sempstresses may have projected an appealing image of feminine docility that clashed against the artifice of the surrounding city, but their visibility within urban literature served to expose their exploiters, thereby connecting them (howsoever tangentially) to the influential working-class activism that had profound effects on the conditions of workers throughout the nineteenth century. Thus while panoramic sketches purported to offer a fragmentary "snap shot" of the working woman's life, they in fact gave readers a glimpse into the clichéd – but simultaneously contested – spaces that seamstresses occupied within the nineteenth-century cityscape.

While women traversing the fictionalized cities constructed by print culture were being gazed upon and labeled, they simultaneously found themselves written out of, and effectively barred from, public spaces. As Victorian women were increasingly associated with the domestic sphere, in other words, the women who took to the urban streets in the pursuit of their professions or their pleasures all but invited the gaze of types more "at home" in these streets: the poor, idle, and disreputable. Men, of course, were free to

circulate the city and at liberty to look at anyone in their line of sight.[17] If it is difficult to discover the trace of real women as they roamed throughout the city, Balzac furnishes us with an example of the fate that befalls a respectable woman who exposes both her poorly concealed body and her reputation in the streets of Paris. In his novella *Ferragus* (1834), Balzac aligns himself with the young man spying on Madame Jules, who is presented as a riddle to crack rather than a mere urban stroller: "à la manière dont s'entortille une Parisienne dans son châle, à la manière dont elle lève le pied dans la rue, un homme d'esprit devine le secret de sa course mystérieuse."[18] To be seen outside the home was to make oneself a subject of wild conjunctures based on such visual investigations. If a shawl or footstep were enough to condemn or condone a woman seen in the streets, it is only because authors and artists created and enshrined a reductive model of the city wherein urbanites were defined by the most superficial outward characteristics. Creating a miniaturized city in order to better understand the real thing has pronounced drawbacks according to Henri Lefebvre who recognizes the threat that this reduction can pose to actual urbanites: "many people, members of a variety of groups and classes, suffer (albeit unevenly) the effects of a multiplicity of reductions bearing on their capacities, ideas, 'values' and, ultimately, on their possibilities, their space and their bodies."[19] The bodies of seamstresses – who were typified on both class and gender lines – were particularly prone to the effects wrought by this urban miniaturization. Depicted

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[17] While the "impudent" gazing of lower-class men was perceived as a menace by upper-class women, it was a risk they took when exposing themselves upon the city streets. See Walkowitz, 51.
[18] Honoré Balzac, *Ferragus* (St. Peter Port, Guernsey: Dodo Press, 2006) 5.
[19] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991) 106.

within panoramic literature as yet another urban commodity, French grisettes and British sempstresses were appealing because they were women and representable because they were workers.[20] Symbolically charged figures, seamstresses embodied a sort of idealized city dweller (eternally young, hopeful, and mobile) created by those seeking to describe the changed nineteenth-century city without reflecting on the impact that their visual and verbal representations might have upon the bodies of these women.

If seamstresses were turned into urban spectacles within the pages of panoramic literature and, consequentially, within the city, the silver lining to this heightened visibility was a sense that competent urban observers would be able to distinguish women walking upon city streets from the veritable street-walkers. Indeed, while French and British panoramic texts invited a voyeuristic gaze that verged on invasive, they also mitigated the stigma of the street to render it an acceptable setting for (some) women. Insisting upon the legibility of social identities, these texts invited rather than discouraged women's participation in urban life, for, even as they called female sexuality into question, "the sexualization of Parisian streets, apartment buildings, and urban observers often had the surprising effect of enhancing rather than negating women's powers of urban locomotion and observation within the discursive world of the *tableaux*."[21] Because one's class status and sexual availability would have been – after a period of indiscreet observation – ascertainable, respectable women were guaranteed to be

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[20] Indeed, in all literature dealing with the urban social and economic scene these women were viewed as exploited bodies rather than exploited laborers. See Judith Coffin, *The Politics of Women's Work: The Paris Garment Trades, 1750-1915* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996) 65.

[21] Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999) 40.

recognized as such when out on the streets. One could argue, then, that these urban texts – by turning working women into legitimate objects of male scopic fantasy – actually made city streets safer for bourgeois women. In fact, the willingness of a bourgeois woman to be seen in public was almost a sure sign of her innocence since, by allowing herself to be witnessed, she was all but proclaiming that she had no reason to hide from view. Looking at the participants in urban life as the heroes of modernity, we can then celebrate the anonymity and freedom afforded by the city. As knowable types, seamstresses were rarely anonymous, however, and, of course, bourgeois women were never really free, but these women still shared the cityscape with ogling men, thus carving out for themselves a share in the experience of modernity.

The Grisette on Display, The Grisette as Display

Before being canonized as the pretty face of Paris's bohemia during France's July Monarchy (1830-1848), the grisette was just another working girl, according to Louis-Sébastien Mercier who, in his late eighteenth-century tableau of the city, defines her as "la jeune fille qui, n'ayant ni naissance ni bien, est obligée de travailler pour vivre."[22] Mercier's text – which can be loosely summed up as a critique of contemporary mores embedded within a series of vignettes profiling the city's inhabitants, activities, and spaces – turns its narrative spotlight away from question of work, however, to focus on the grisette's more colorful personal life. Mercier's *Tableau de Paris* (1781-1788) can

[22] Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Le tableau de Paris* 1781- 88 (Paris: La Découverte, 1992) 164. The grisette, of course, predates Mercier. It is with Mercier's text – a precursor to the nineteenth-century *tableaux* – that the grisette becomes an inevitable feature of the city.

therefore be read as a prototype for the city guides and *physiologies* that proliferated a few decades later with their similar preoccupation with what a grisette looked like and the urban spaces she occupied on one hand, and a lack of sustained attention to her productivity or role in the market economy, on the other. Mobility and circulation are key concerns for Mercier who initially concludes that liberty renders the grisette more fortunate than her bourgeois counterparts, affirming that "la grisette est plus heureuse dans sa pauvreté que la fille du bourgeois: elle se licencie dans l'âge où ses charmes ont encore de l'éclat; son indigence lui donne une pleine liberté, et son bonheur vient quelquefois de n'avoir point eu de dot" (164). A happy-go-lucky figure in Paris, the grisette is nevertheless a problem for France. Because she values independence over marriage, this working woman enters into irregular (or unregulated) relationships with male lovers and just as husband and fathers failed to contain these women so too does the city in which they live: "ce vice embrasse aujourd'hui non seulement Paris, mais toute la France et même une partie de l'Europe" (165). Primarily interested in the big picture and focusing on the grisette as a small piece of the urban whole, Mercier jumps from the petty "problem" posed by the grisette's lax morals to "cette situation de tant de femmes qui couvrent la France" (166). The grisette thus serves as a catalyst that leads Mercier to larger social issues (such as the exploitation of workers and the subjugation of women) and, by shifting from description to prescription, he envisions a solution wherein working women would be transformed into wives.

Mercier's text is noteworthy for the way in which it evokes the grisette in order to attack a larger social problem – namely, the dowry system – but later authors tended to

view this key urban figure as a paragon of social virtues. The grisette, in other words, came to represent what was right – rather than wrong – about Paris. If, however, by the nineteenth century, the grisette was firmly established as a must-see Parisian attraction, it was not because male writers were interested in the products of her labor but, rather, because they were drawn to her as an icon of the freedom made possible by the anonymity of the city. Always unmarried and usually parentless, the grisettes of popular imagination were well-known (but not necessarily notorious) man-magnets according to writers and artists of the *physiologies* and Parisian guides produced during the July Monarchy. What distinguished them from prostitutes – or the fictionalized *lorettes* – is the fact that they were, according to the authors and artists who penned them, domesticated urban figures. Grisettes, in other words, may have been closely associated with the city that produced them, but they were equally well known as the homemakers of the Latin Quarter, cultivating comfort in the artist studios, student apartments, and inexpensive garrets throughout the neighborhood. Looking specifically at the images and text of the *Physiologie de la grisette* by Louis Huart (1841), one becomes aware of the extent to which the grisette's appeal was founded on this double nature, as she is at once associated with the pursuit of pleasure in the modern city and the quieter comforts of home. This double nature is, of course, closely tied to her identity as a sexually appealing urban type as she offered her male admirers the best of both worlds: the sexual promiscuity one would expect from a mistress coupled with the domestic caretaking more frequently associated with a wife.

If her unmarried and typically parentless state afforded the grisette a certain degree of mobility by freeing her from the family foyer, she was nevertheless – and perhaps somewhat paradoxically – celebrated as an emblem of domestic bliss. Embodying the best qualities of the bourgeois homemaker (bringing cleanliness and cheer to what would otherwise be unlovely spaces), the grisette was unconstrained by the rules of decorum that confined more privileged women to their homes and limited roles within their family circles. Indeed, it is this double view of her as an urban pleasure seeker and model of domesticity that made her a difficult type to define. In the frontispiece to *Physiologie de la grisette* (1841), caricaturist Gavarni captures the grisette in all her domestic – and professional – glory as she sews in what appears to be a well-appointed (or at least sufficiently furnished) room [figure 1.2].[23] Unlike images of sewing British sempstresses, which will be discussed further below, Gavarni's grisette is not hunched over her work, does not appear exhausted, and quite clearly seems more intent on daydreaming than on quickly finishing the piece she is sewing. The image manages to show her both at work and not at work, as labor is what makes her an identifiable figure but is clearly not the point of her widespread appeal. The instant recognizability of the figure in Gavarni's image – due just as much to the cap on the grisette's head to the needle in her hand – eluded writers trying to describe the figure in words. If Janin insisted

[23] Credited with having invented the *lorette* (a hybrid figure that was something of a cross between a grisette and a prostitute), Gavarni played a significant role in solidifying the recognizability of urban types. While it is not in the scope of this study to investigate the rise of the popular press in the 1830s, it should be noted that the authors and artists of these cheap *physiologies* were inventing these types during a period of growing literacy, increased newspaper subscription, and intense rivalry between competing papers and publishers. Moreover, as newspapers were increasingly censored for political content, authors and artists turned to humor and began poking fun at the hypocrisy and vulgarity of the middle class as an expressive outlet for their often acerbic social criticisms.

Figure 1.2 Gavarni, Frontispiece, *Physiologie de la grisette* 1841 (Paris: Ressources, 1979).

that readers of *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* must actually see the grisette in order to understand what all the fuss was about, Huart immediately admits to the semantic challenge posed by this popular type as "son plus grand charme est d'être indéfinissable."[24] As a type, in other words, the grisette was more easily recognized by sight than by verbal description. Indeed, when Huart finally – in the second chapter of his text – manages to produce an actual definition, the grisette comes across as a rather banal figure: "la grisette, la veritable et non contrefaite, est une jeune fille de seize à trente ans

[24] Louis Huart, *Physiologie de la grisette*, 1841 (Paris: Ressources, 1979) 9.

qui travaille, coud ou brode toute la semaine, et s'amuse le dimanche" (12). Like Mercier – who initially relies on a work-based identification – Huart is obviously dissatisfied with his prosaic definition of this urban type and proceeds to define her in relation to her fellow city dwellers for readers who undoubtedly had heard it all before and who, moreover, had already grasped the salient components – work, youth, and fashion – that defined the nineteenth-century grisette after a glance at Gavarni's opening image.

Huart may have been awarded top billing on the text's title page, but the prominence of Gavarni's images (and indeed, the appearance of his name on the opening page as well) indicates that the text is obviously a joint effort between author and artist.[25] While text and image never actually contradict each other, Huart and Gavarni employ different methods for framing the grisette. Whereas Huart's grisettes are typically described in relation to other people – the *grandes dames* who despise them, fellow workers, or their bohemian lovers – Gavarni's grisettes are largely solitary creatures, gazing out of windows or walking, modestly cloaked, through the city streets. Indeed, the sheer number of grisettes leaning out of windows in this *physiologie* (a total of 4) shows them as housebound figures that are nevertheless visible to city dwellers roaming the streets below. Moreover, by making viewers look up into (rather than out from) the grisette's window, Gavarni turns them into voyeurs watching a woman who seems unaware of their presence. In another portrait of a sewing grisette, Gavarni situates the seamstress between an open window and what appears to be a draping curtain, depicting

[25] For a greater discussion of the collaboration and competition between artist and author in the French press during this period see Keri Berg, "Contesting the Page: The Author and the Illustrator in France, 1830-1848," *Book History* 10.1 (2007) 69-101.

her in such a way that both exposes her to the viewer and protects her privacy [figure 1.3]. Preoccupied with her handiwork, she could be any woman – bourgeois or working-class – if it were not for the fact of her visibility. Indeed, the only class of women who would have ever been seen (especially in print) sewing by spectators would necessarily have been the grisettes. Another of Gavarni's more iconic images of the grisette places her once more at a window, this time carefully tending (or, according to Huart, overwatering) flowers [figure 1.4]. While being seen (by the public, but in a private space) helps viewers identify the seamstress as a grisette – rather than a leisure-class housewife sewing for her family – the gardening grisette is not working, nor is she pursuing pleasures in the city but, rather, she is tending to her home and its surroundings.

Figure 1.3 Gavarni, *Physiologie de la grisette* 1841 (Paris: Ressources, 1979): 41.

Figure 1.4 Gavarni, *Physiologie de la grisette* 1841 (Paris: Ressources, 1979): 39.

These images thus complicate the grisette's relationship to the city she supposedly represents, as she is both part of the urban scenery for the observers on the streets below her and an emblem of domesticity. Indeed, by portraying the grisette as though she were sighted (almost as if by accident) through open windows, these images challenge the notion of display that defined this figure as a type.

Although they are instantly recognizable figures, Gavarni's grisettes are not exhibitionists and their exaggerated visibility upon the cityscape has less to do with the significance of seamstresses within nineteenth-century Paris and more to do with the rising influence of fashion displays in consumer culture. Mourning the demise of the female *trottin* (merchandise deliverer), for example, Huart celebrates her role as an

ambulatory advertisement, as this figure served both as eye-candy for the city's observing *flâneurs* and as an ambassador for fashion. Indeed, the grisette – an urban type associated with naturalness and authenticity – was an obvious choice for promoting the artificial world of dress. As positively valorized figures, in other words, grisettes neutralized fashion's association with deceit and masquerade. Of course, this role had its dangers and, while the grisette's transparent good nature redeemed fashion in the public's eyes, it also occasionally served as her downfall. Numerous authors – including Mercier and Huart – discuss the fallen grisette as one who was tempted, not by a life of ease but, rather, by a life filled with finery and fashion. Just as the public / private nature of the grisette complicated representations of her, so too did this troubling stance vis-à-vis the fashion industry. Viewing the grisette for this reason as a relatively unstable type, critic Alain Lescart discusses the two paths her life could take:

> Il faut … reconnaître l'existence, en littérature, de deux types de grisettes: d'une part, celle qui par sa coquetterie a plutôt tendance à s'éloigner de la condition même de la grisette du fait de ses gouts luxueux, c'est celle qui besogne pour sortir de sa condition de grisette et acquérir une position de rentière, et celle qui, d'autre part, reste dans sa condition, travaille assidûment pour ne récolter que quelques malheureuses miettes de pain, mais qui se satisfait d'une vie simple.[26]

As a figure whose very domesticity was staged for public consumption and who was made to represent fashion without ever desiring to become fashionable, the grisette inhabited a circumscribed – if not impossibly narrow – space in the popular imagination.

If grisettes negotiated the fine line between the public and private realms or between seeming frank or fashionable, it appears to have been an effortless endeavor as

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[26] Alain Lescart, *Splendeurs et misères de la grisette: Évolution d'une figure emblématique* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008) 89.

they were rarely depicted as complex, or even conflicted, characters. Their appeal as types can, in fact, be largely attributed to their absolute simplicity. They live only for the moment, according to Huart, without dwelling on deeper meanings or future troubles: "*Demain* est un mot qui n'existe pas pour la grisette; et si vous lui soutenez que ce mot est pourtant français, et qu'il se trouve dans le *Dictionnaire de l'Académie*, elle vous rira au nez, attendu que le *Dictionnaire de l'Académie* n'existe guère davantage pour la grisette" (89-90). This naïve approach to complicated issues was undoubtedly a relief for the consumers of urban literature who looked to types to teach them how to manage the new – and seemingly contradictory – demands of city life. An embodiment of wishful thinking, the grisette was the product of consumer discomfort, according to art historian Denise Amy Baxter, which grew as nineteenth-century urbanites took stock of their ability to buy their share and role in city life:

> The grisette might be understood as an attempt on the part of the public, whose purchasing power allowed for the proliferation of the type, to deny the implications of capitalism. That the grisette, in effect, bought and sold yet somehow remain innocent might allow for the possibility that one could escape the commodifying aspects of capitalism unscathed.[27]

It is not as though consumers of panoramic literature would have tried to model themselves on the grisette, however. They would, rather, have sought refuge in the fictional urban spaces that these figures inhabited. Suspended above the streets of Paris – but still visible to those upon them – grisettes taught Parisians to view the city as a site that was, at once, comfortably intimate and endlessly accessible.

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[27]Denise Amy Baxter, "Grisettes, Cocottes, and *Bohèmes*: Fashion and Fiction in the 1820s," *Text and Clothing in Literature, Film, and Television*, Ed. Peter McNeil, Vicki Karaminas, and Catherine Cole (Oxford: Berg, 2009) 29.

Cherchez la grisette: Observing the Observers

If the grisette was a reassuring urban figure that served as a conduit to the idealized spaces of a fictionalized Paris, she was also – and perhaps more obviously – an appealing type that was consistently read as sexually available. Indeed, in both text and image the grisette is, more often than not, identified by the presence of men lingering around her. In her profile of the *modiste* in *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes*, Maria d'Anspach maintains that – more than hatboxes or other tools of their trade – the presence of male admirers helped make these women recognizable to urban observers:

> Si, parmi tous ces individus d'aspect différent, vous voyez passer une jeune fille à la tournure degagée et libre, qui marche vite, est mise avec plus de coquetterie que de bon goût, jette un coup d'oeil curieux sur tout ce qui l'entoure, et prête, chemin faisant, l'oreille aux gallants propos des jeunes gens qui la suivent ou s'arrêtent sur son passage ; – c'est la modiste.[28]

Identifying the milliner through the men who watch, follow, or admire her, d'Anspach celebrates the prerogatives of male *flânerie*, which reduces the working woman to the status of urban spectacle. Illustrators likewise used the presence of men to signify the grisette. In a sketch of Parisian life illustrated by British artist John Leech, the grisette's admirer is off to the side and in the shadows as an unseen seer [figure 1.5]. The grisette is seemingly unaware of this man's presence and yet still implicated by the assumption of availability that his hovering implies. Indeed, the prevalence of stalking men in both image and text complicates the grisette's supposedly straightforward sexuality. By all

[28] Maria d'Anspach, "La modiste," *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* 8 vols. (Paris: Curmer, 1843) 3:105.

Figure 1.5 John Leech, "Sketches of Parisian Life: The Grisette," *The Illuminated Magazine* 2 (1844): 192.

accounts, she was a relatively carefree lover who aligned herself with the young, attractive, and typically poor students and artists of the Latin Quarter. Framing the grisette as a victim of sexual harassment *avant la lettre*, however, authors and artists negate the autonomous role she plays in these relationships. Indeed, these sexually

passive grisettes hardly differ from another clichéd type of the nineteenth century: the seduced, or fallen, woman. The primary distinction would have been that the fallen woman was implicated in her seduction whereas the grisette's sexual fall was all but preordained, as a required attribute of her type. These images thus complicate notions of the grisette as a free urban type by insisting on her role as an attractive piece of the city's scenery staged to delight men. Grisettes could be both independent workers and objects of male scopic pleasure, according to art historian Anne Higonnet, because they were fictional figures that had nothing to do with real women: "images of laundresses, milliners, and seamstresses proliferated during the Restoration and July Monarchy [1815-1848], precisely because the fact that these tradeswomen did not actually make or sell anything on the street allowed interpretation of their presence there the scope of fantasy."[29] Indeed, these urban fantasies – rather than the grisette who inspired them – were more often than not the real point of interest for the writers who set out to celebrate the experience of the male *flâneur* in the city.

The city was consistently depicted as a dangerous space for women throughout the nineteenth century, as they were regularly swept up by senseless crowds, affronted by working-class insolence, or exposed to leering men in both text and image. While working-class women – with their sharp tongues and violent tempers – were often portrayed as an urban menace, grisettes were a notable exception. They were, more often than not, able to circulate freely throughout the city, enjoying the urban pleasures

[29] Anne Higonnet, "Real Fashion: Clothes Unmake the Working Woman," *Spectacles of Realism: Gender, Body, Genre*, Ed. Margaret Cohen and Christopher Prendergast (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995) 147.

typically reserved for men (such as dining out or attending public balls and low-brow theatrical performances). Even when pursued through the streets by unsolicited male attention, these women were merely followed and admired and rarely ever endangered. So while bourgeois women faced threats when moving about the city, grisettes mostly experienced harmless flirtation. There is of course a fine line between attention and harassment, which Huart, perhaps unintentionally, evokes when comparing hovering men to hunting wolves: "partout où l'on rencontre des trottoirs, de la pluie et des grisettes, on peut être certain de trouver aussi des parapluies en embuscade qui, comme des loups dévorants, n'attendent que la première goutte de liquide céleste pour s'élancer au-dessus de la tête de timides brebis, modistes de profession" (64). Metonymically reducing men to the umbrellas with which they "rescue" sprinkled grisettes, Huart quickly transforms this comic image into a more disturbing one by depicting these women as sheep on the verge of being devoured. Likewise, in an image by Gavarni, which appeared alongside Huart's text, the male admirer is shown leaning into – and not just looking at, or following – the grisette [figure 1.6]. The angle of the bodies implies swift movement and the fact that the man is a step behind the woman (rather than besides her) indicates that he is not exactly a welcome escort. Gavarni's image thus illustrates the extent to which quick assumptions about the grisette's unrestrained sexuality and carefree nature were challenged by the very authors and artists who created the figure as a type. What this image does do, in other words, is make visible the force with which men tried – and were able – to control the movement of women throughout the city.

Figure 1.6 Gavarni, *Physiologie de la grisette* 1841 (Paris: Ressources, 1979): 10.

In spite of all the energy devoted to following grisettes throughout Paris, they are frequently not the point. More often than not, stories or illustrations deal only superficially with grisettes and are more pointedly concerned with the urban experience of men. Indeed, once she is stripped of her admiring male entourage, grisettes seemed

unable to capture or sustain the attention of urban writers. In his misleadingly-titled story "Mademoiselle Mimi Pinson: Profil de grisette," Alfred de Musset, tells the story of Eugène Aubert, a medical student, who sets himself apart from his companions in the Latin Quarter by resisting the city's charms (and grisettes): "chose presque monstreuse parmi les étudiants, non-seulement Eugène n'avait pas de maîtresse, quoique son âge et sa figure eussent pu lui valoir des succès, mais on ne l'avait jamais vu faire le galent au comptoir d'une grisette, usage immémorial au quartier latin."[30] This refusal to pursue grisettes has nothing to do with respect and everything to do with repugnance, as he saw only the pains – and never the pleasures – they caused. Whereas the grisette was often pursued and admired as a representative type (rather than individual woman), Marcel has no problem with Mimi as a person but strongly objects to her as a grisette. Moreover, as an anti-*flâneur* figure with provincial – rather than urban – values, he continuously misreads and misunderstands Mimi and the tale is more about his education in the urban code system than it is about the grisette. Viewing cheerfulness as frivolity and resignation as irresponsibility, Eugène fails to appreciate the grisette as an exemplar of Baudelarian modernity – an emblem of "le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l'art, dont l'autre moitié est l'éternel et l'immuable" – and he sees waste where others might recognize a careless gaiety that defies the hardships associated with the working woman's life in Paris.[31]

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[30] Alfred de Musset, "Mademoiselle Mimi Pinson: Profil de grisette," *Diable à Paris: Paris et les Parisiens* (Paris: J. Hetzel, 1845) 328.
[31] Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1980) 797.

Musset's story is about Eugène's experience of the metropolis and, like all tales featuring young provincial men in Paris, it features a guide who helps the young student navigate the turbulent social scene of the city. Marcel, a fellow student and more canonical denizen of the Latin Quarter, tries to educate Eugène first through verbal explanations and eventually through sight and experience. Staging a meeting between the student and Mimi Pinson, a model grisette, Marcel forces Eugène to encounter a part of urban life he was only too happy to ignore. Musset's grisettes – Mimi, Zélia, and Rougette – were ideal guides to this particular version of the Parisian lifestyle as they were standard representatives of their type: kind, disinterested, fun-loving, and perpetually threatened by hunger and the hospital. Marcel acknowledges and accepts the brief lifespan of the grisettes – arguing that "elles sont bonnes, aimables, fidèles et désintéressées, et que c'est une chose regrettable, lorsqu'elles finissent à l'hôpital" – but Eugène, who keeps waiting for the grisette to learn her lesson and adopt a different path in life, cannot (330). It is, of course, Eugène's own education that remains incomplete, as he fails to recognize or appreciate the qualities that render Mimi a model grisette. He would, in other words, have Mimi transform into the sort of bourgeois woman – defined by thrift, common sense, and prudence – that a grisette, by definition, could never be. Musset's story thus illustrates the extent to which the grisette, as a type, was at odds with the dominant ideology – exemplified by bourgeois values – of her time and place. The grisette only ever was, at best, a harmless rebel and, as she was increasingly associated with – or limited to – the space of bohemian Paris, she was subsequently marginalized by her imagined role within this contained community of artists. While it is clearly Eugène –

and not Mimi – who is the outsider in their shared Parisian neighborhood, it is nevertheless his gaze that shapes the larger city in which, ultimately, only he could freely circulate.

On boulevards or in boudoirs – public or private spaces – grisettes were, according to the writers of panoramic literature, dominated by the knowing eye of men. Because they were recognized as grisettes, they were subjected to being followed by admirers whose hovering presence made these women even more legible to urban observers. They never escaped, in other words, their recognizability as types and so were never able to enjoy the effects of anonymity promised by the city. This transparency associated with images of grisettes is, of course, a fiction and, perhaps, one of the reasons this method of urban profiling – exemplified by the *physiologies* – was so short-lived. People are not so easily knowable and the popularity of the mysteries genre, spectacularly launched by Eugène Sue in the 1840s, effectively ended the reign of the *physiologies* and urban *tableaux*, with their legible – and therefore malleable – types.[32] Around this same time, social scientists began replacing the *flâneur* as experts on the social world / underworld of Paris. Like the *flâneur*, they turned their gaze upon the city's working women, but instead of seeing them as appealing types or as emblems of the city's modernity, they became, in their eyes, an embodiment of the social problem of labor. As far as these new observers were concerned, these economically insignificant figures were, as Judith Coffin argues, "no longer aestheticized, no longer artists, no longer artisans"

[32] While Sue draws attention to the mystery, rather than legibility, of the city, he nevertheless uses the techniques of characterization established by the *physiologies*, as I shall discuss in greater length in Chapter 3.

(250). No longer a boulevard attraction, the grisette eventually became the *ouvrière*, evolving from an attractive – and essentially optimistic – urban type into the social problem she would remain for the rest of the century.

The Rural Sempstress upon London's Panorama

While the French grisette was an incarnation of the city's delights to the male writers who invented her, the British sempstress was a very different – though similarly urban and equally fictional – figure.[33] Sad and thoughtful in the same degree that the grisette is merry and light-hearted, the sempstress is, according to Marianne Postans in her "Sketches of Parisian Life: The Grisette," written into a very different sort of urban space:

> The contrast of the grisette to the London milliner's girl, with her wan cheek, her lusterless eye, her attenuated frame, her narrow chest, her consumptive cough, is remarkable indeed, -- the one is care-worn and sad, the other thoughtless and merry. Both work hard – both have sleepless nights, scanty meals, and often an empty purse; but the poor London girl, while the grisette is dancing in the open air, or laughing heartily at a farce on the Boulevards, is penned in a cold cheerless garret, with aching head and heart, pining over that misery of the parents or the sisters, which her utmost toil cannot avert.[34]

With regular appearances in texts ranging from the statistical blue books to the comic literary magazine *Punch*, the sempstress captured the attention – and imagination – of Londoners from every walk of life, while the hazy distinction between the reproduction

[33] While, in French, one can easily distinguish the fictional from the real working women through the "grisette" label, English lacks such a linguistic distinction between the imagined and the actual women, so I shall use the term "sempstress" when talking of the fictional versions of sewing women and "seamstress" when speaking more generally of these workers.
[34] Marianne Postans, "Sketches of Parisian Life: The Grisette," *The Illuminated Magazine* 2 (1844): 195.

of facts, on one hand, and the invention of fancies, on the other, became a defining feature of these numerous representations. While the official discourse vis-à-vis London's working class came from the government blue books, they were often reprinted (or excerpted) in the popular press, inspiring numerous literary responses. Indeed, the difficulty in separating fact from fiction in various portrayals of urban seamstresses can be attributed to this juxtaposition between news and novels in newspapers and, more generally, the ambiguous status of literary journalism. Like French writers of urban literature, British writers who wrote about working women often got their start as journalists on fledgling papers. Charles Dickens' fictional vignettes of the 1830s, for example, were published in *The Morning Chronicle*, which later disseminated Henry Mayhew's reports on the London poor. As a space where comedic sketches could co-exist with more sobering reportage on world events, newspapers of the early to mid-nineteenth century relayed snippets of news and current events in a heteroglot forum that fused the factual and fabricated. Caught in this textual crossfire, suffering sempstresses nevertheless emerged as a recognizable type from the print culture of the nineteenth century.

Associated with the city – whose garrets became the symbol of both her poverty and her moral elevation – the sempstress was nevertheless an embodiment of the nostalgia that Londoners felt for an imagined and regretted rural past. As a type, she came into her own after the 1843 publication of Thomas Hood's "The Song of the Shirt" in *Punch*, which depicts a woman sewing in a sordid London room while recalling a bucolic space far from the city:

> Oh! but to breathe the breath
> Of the cowslip and primrose sweet –
> With the sky above my head,
> And the grass beneath my feet.[35]

It is clear that – for this type, in any case – the city is associated with work and privation while the country alone holds the promise of leisure. Hood's portrayal, then, reveals the twofold nature of this type as it was conceived in the popular imagination: on one hand, she represented the perils of capitalism and urbanization while, on the other, she exemplified the city dweller's regret vis-à-vis his or her exile from England's idealized countryside.[36] More than the poems or even the great paintings that depicted spiritual but starving sempstresses, the government reports enshrined this figure as an emblem of the city's underclass.[37] The modernity of the British sempstress is thus different from that of the French grisette. A representative of the troubled times, the sempstress reminded her contemporaries of the slipperiness of social class and position, as she who was calmly breathing the pure country air at one moment could easily be suspended above the noxious fumes of the city the next.

If the Victorian sempstress was defined in the popular imagination by her longing for a return to rural roots, she was simultaneously associated with the pitiful

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[35] Thomas Hood, "The Song of the Shirt," *Punch*, 5 (1843): 260.

[36] Whereas the provincial in French literature tries to deny his rural roots and unsophisticated upbringing in favor of a Parisian identity, the protagonists of many English works identify far more with the country that with the city. Arguing that "even after the society was predominately urban its literature, for a generation, was still predominantly rural," Raymond Williams maintains that the rural had far more sway over the British imagination (2). While, by the nineteenth-century, urban themes (like, for instance, the overwork and underpay of working women) had infiltrated English literature, the countryside is continually viewed as the antidote to the city's problems and stresses.

[37] Capturing the look of sweet deprivation that defined the Victorian sempstress, Richard Redgrave's 1844 painting *The Sempstress* influenced numerous other painters and elevated the subject of working-class suffering by placing it before a middle-class audience. R.D. Grainger's 1843 *Second Report on Children's Employment Commission* likewise set the tone for the statistical studies looking into London's working and poor populations.

insufficiencies of her lower-class dwellings.[38] As evinced by Hood's poem, needlewomen were nearly always depicted alone in their garrets (although many actually lived in cheaper and less salubrious cellars) and the imagined uniformity of their domestic interiors came to distinguish, more than dress or other physical attributes, the seamstress from other women. Constituting a symbolic vocabulary instantly understood by readers and viewers, the sempstress's paltry possessions become meaningful as metonymic signifiers since, as T.J. Edelstein argues, "the small attic room illuminated by a single candle and the dawn light, a few meager possessions – including a spindly plant; a broken bowl; a bed, table, and chair; and an empty fireplace – all acquire meaning by constant repetition."[39] Indeed, it was the presence of such things that made these women recognizable types because seamstresses were virtually undistinguishable from other women while upon city streets. Their homes had, then, to differentiate them from the middle-class women they resembled and from the working classes amongst whom they lived. While it would seem that, according to Janet Wolff, "the literature of modernity ignores the private sphere, and to that extent is silent on the subject of women's primary domain," these glimpses into the sempstress's dwelling do, in fact, conflate both the urban and domestic.[40] It is only ever a problematic domesticity – indeed, a perversion of the middle-class hominess to which it aspires – as the objects that occupy these interiors all speak to the sempstress's misery: the candle reminds readers (or viewers) of the

[38] Cleanliness played an important role in the depictions of a sempstress's space. Some, like Hood, admitted to the dirt endemic to such locales while other writers elevated their sempstresses above their working-class neighbors by emphasizing her clean and respectable ways.
[39] T.J. Edelstein, "They Sang 'The Song of the Shirt': The Visual Iconology of the Seamstress," *Victorian Studies* 23.2 (1980) 188.
[40] Janet Wolff, "The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 2.3 (1985) 44.

sempstress's long work hours; the plant of her former life in the country; the broken pottery of her reversed fortunes. The *thinginess* of these representations thus accentuates the manner in which possessions (or, indeed, the lack thereof) define this figure's recognizability upon the urban panorama.

Making Visible the Invisible: The Disembodied Sempstress

For all of her appearances in art and literature, the sempstress was frequently featured as an absent presence in the city. Indeed, it would seem, based on the numerous artistic renditions of this figure in the popular press, that the most visible kind of sempstress was a dead sempstress. Displacing sickly and consumptive bodies with images of shrouds and sewing skeletons, authors and artists implored city dwellers to look on as needlewomen killed themselves – literally – in the pursuit of their trade. Work and death often went hand in hand in portraits of these women who were, as Hood poetically put it, "sewing at once, with a double thread, / A Shroud as well as a Shirt" (260). In his illustration, "The Haunted Lady, or The Ghost in the Looking Glass," John Tenniel shows a spectral seamstress haunting the elegant clothing that she has died making [figure 1.7]. As an elaborately attired customer regards her reflection in a mirror, her image is juxtaposed with that of the fainting or perishing seamstress who would naturally have been absent from the shop and hidden from view. Because we cannot see the customer's face, her reaction is impossible to gauge, but the simpering expression of the shop-owner betrays no pity for the young worker. The ghost of the perishing or seamstress may or may not have been ignored by the beauty admiring her own reflection

Figure 1.7 John Tenniel, "The Haunted Lady, or 'The Ghost in the Looking Glass," *Punch* 45 (1863): 5.

disregarded by the shop-owner unable to see past her profits, but it is, of course, really aimed at the viewer who is, perhaps, meant to put herself in the faceless customer's place.[41] If Victorians were bombarded with demands to *see* the invisible worker behind a host of ready-made objects, it is because the anonymity of such urban commerce was a

[41] While bourgeois women were openly condemned for the manner in which their consumption of clothing exploited needlewomen, they were nevertheless the consumers of very texts and images that accused them of this practice. See Susan P. Casteras, "'Weary Stitches': Illustrations and Paintings for Thomas Hood's 'Song of the Shirt' and Other Poems," *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century*, Ed. Beth Harris (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005) 33.

relatively new phenomenon.[42] These images thus forced indifferent customers to come face to face with the women who paid the price for their access to such cheap clothing.

Tenniel's image is remarkable for the way in which it stages a confrontation between the exploited dressmaker and the indifferent customer and for the obvious challenge it presents to the complacent viewer. Unlike the seamstresses on display in French popular literature, dead sempstresses like Tenniel's are exhibited as a sort of anti-spectacle, so to speak, as they are the visual embodiment of what Victorians refused to look at or, rather, to see. Yet there is no voyeurism implied by these images, according to the anonymous author of "Death and the Drawing Room or The Young Dressmakers of England," who argues that her purpose relates to education rather than entertainment as "this paper is written with no purpose of affording mere information or the gratification of curiosity, but with an earnest wish to drive people out of their strongholds of indifference and calculating politics, and, by bringing home to their feelings the suffering which is now remote and hidden."[43] Bringing that which is hidden into plain sight, the accompanying image by Kenny Meadows reconstructs a banal image familiar to Victorian viewers: a woman worker delivering a finished product to the home of her wealthy customers [figure 1.8]. The woman is of course an incongruous figure within such a luxurious setting and not because she is a worker (as she is clearly a more respectable dressmaker – rather than lower-class slopworker – if one were to judge by her attire) but, rather, due to the absence of her body. Composed merely of bones and a few

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[42] See Edelstein, 189.
[43] "Death and the Drawing Room or The Young Dressmakers of England," *Illuminated Magazine* 1 (1843): 97.

Figure 1. 8 Kenny Meadows, "Death and the Drawing Room or The Young Dressmakers of England," *The Illuminated Magazine* 1 (1843): 97.

items of tasteful clothing, the dressmaker delivers both a garment box and visual evidence of working-class suffering to the sumptuously-furnished drawing room. It is

important, moreover, that the skeletal dressmaker be properly attired since it is usually only through fashion that the dressmaker enjoys a public presence in the first place. Obscured by the finery she produces, the seamstress, in other words, emerges from the fabric's folds only as a specter, becoming visible in order to confront the Victorians who, in commissioning dresses, killed the dressmakers.

Writers and artists have long drawn public attention to the disparity between the hypervisibility of fashion and the invisibility of fashion's producers. In "Death and the Drawing Room," the author makes this a spatial distinction by showing how luxurious attire is displayed behind glass, while workers are obscured by walls that not only conceal them from view but also confine them as within a sort of prison:

> Not only in nearly every large town in England, but here, in this very London where we live, in its gayest and most crowded streets, and more especially at this its gayest and most crowded season, every here and there are to be found houses of business, displaying at their windows all that is most attractive in fashion, but containing within their walls the victims of the luxury to which they minister. (98)

The walls may contain the workers within their place of employment – and out of public view – but they also keep them divorced from the bustling urban world beyond. Theirs, in other words, is the world of work and behind-the-scenes drudgery, not the gay and crowded life of fashionable London. What the author does here, then, is show how two very different visions of the city can overlap across a single space. While Victorian authors often challenged the permeability of the division between these two spaces, it is nevertheless true that sempstresses were seemingly banished from public view even as the clothes they made took center stage. Artists, too, used the visibility of clothing to heighten the sense of the seamstress's invisibility [figure 1.9]. By placing the visual focus

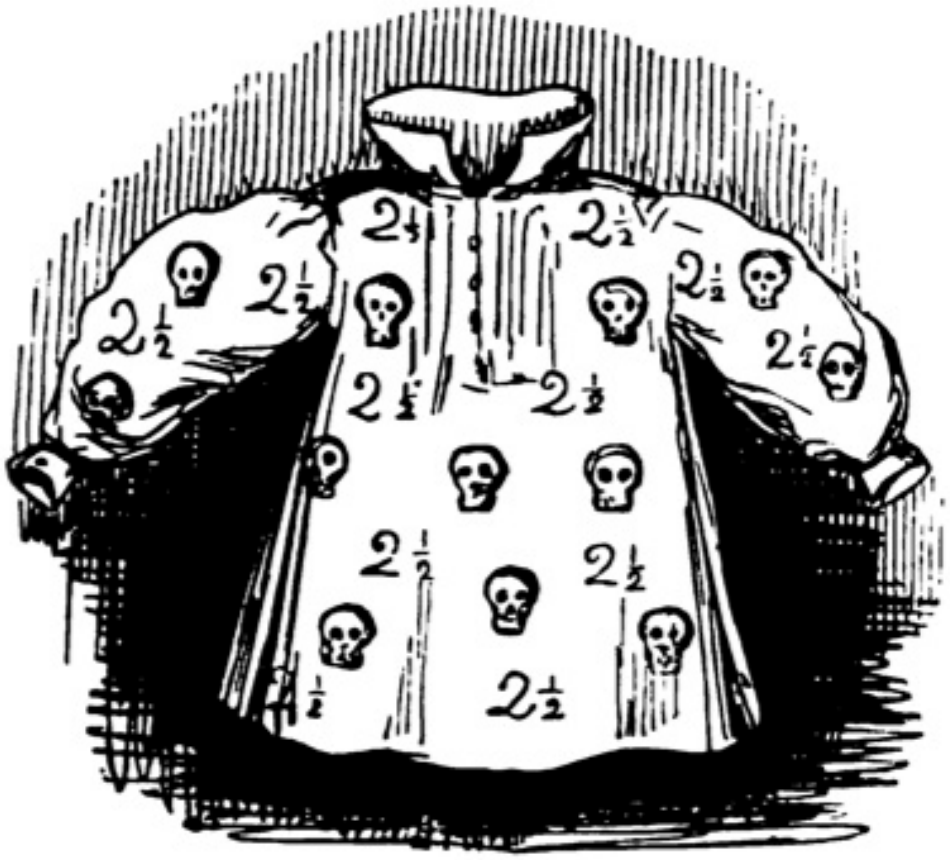

Figure 1.9 “A Shroud as Well as a Shirt,” *Punch* 15 (1848): 76.

on clothing – rather than upon the women who produced it – authors and artists insured that the “problem” of female labor remained constantly under the eyes of Victorian readers and spectators.

Occasionally, in order to more fully (or more safely) expose the horrific conditions under which sempstresses lived and labored, writers went to great lengths to conceal the seamstress from view so that they could reveal her story. In his survey of London’s working class, *London Labour and London Poor* (1851), journalist Henry Mayhew, for example, wanted Londoners – those familiar with (and desensitized to) the

sight of urban poverty – to acquaint themselves with the lives of the city's underclass through his interviews with (rather than observations of) workers. Seeing, according to Mayhew, was not enough, as it promised only an illusionary sort of knowing. Conflating the two female types that were, perhaps, the most visible and the least understood of all the figures gracing the London panorama – the seamstress and the prostitute – Mayhew brought together a group of fallen needlewomen in the hopes that their stories could shed light on the plight of working women in the city. His attempt to publicize something so deeply private called for new modes of visibility and, while arranging a gathering of these women, he went out of his way to control just how much – or who – could be seen: "it was arranged that the gentleman and myself should be the only male persons visible on the occasion, and that the place of meeting should be as dimly lighted as possible, so that they could scarcely see or be seen by one another or by us."[44] Sight is eventually entirely superseded by sound when Mayhew places male journalists behind a screen – where they could neither see nor be seen – so that they might transcribe the women's words. These women thus became disembodied voices for the men who recorded their stories and the readers who consumed them.

The record of this assembly of fallen needlewomen marks a crucial moment in Mayhew's text and in the tradition of the urban survey, as it is the point in which the fallacy that people can be known by sight alone is fully abandoned. Indeed, although the men who are present occasionally lend weight to the women's words by affirming the truthfulness of their statements, readers are informed by the needlewomen's first-hand

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[44] Henry Mayhew, *Voices of the Poor: Selections from the* Morning Chronicle *'Labour and the Poor' (1849-1850)*, Ed. Anne Humpherys (London: Frank Cass, 1971) 91.

accounts rather than the conjectures of the urban male observer. With his dim lights and screened men, Mayhew's assembly resembles, more than anything else, a confessional, but the whispered sins speak to social – rather than personal – failings. While Mayhew's text is situated within a genre that looks (down) upon lower-class inhabitants as a source of social knowledge, these women turn the tables by turning their gaze upon the city. And by challenging prevalent perceptions about themselves, these needlewomen show that they too can decipher the tangled webs that connect London's high and low sectors and that, ultimately, hold the city together.

Beyond the exaggerated and obviously macabre tone of these images, there is a deadly seriousness in the representations of ghostly or invisible seamstresses. Unlike the French grisettes spotted all over Paris or even the martyred sempstresses sewing (and sighing) away in their garrets, these women opened the readers' and viewers' eyes to the all-too-real problems behind nineteenth-century urban labor practices. Rather than evoking an idealized rural alternative to the problems and pressures of city life, in other words, they kept their spectators' attention focused on the urban here and now and forced them to confront the consequences of the economic transformations reshaping London and its social hierarchies. Authors often tried to have it both ways when it came to the Victorian sempstress and she was often initially penned in her cheerless garret, where she was a model of proper domesticity and working-class sobriety, only to, by the text's conclusion, succumb to death. The power of her dead body likely waned as it saturated the literary market, but its role as a reproach remained clear. Moreover, by focusing on the failing body – from the descriptions of consumptive lungs to the depictions of skeletal

forms – authors and artists created a vision of the sempstress that countered the more obviously aestheticized interpretations of this type. Circulating through London carrying garment-boxes and wordless reproaches into upper-class boudoirs and drawing rooms, the skeletal sempstress uses her access to these fiercely private Victorian homes to open a window onto the ignored world of working-class oppression.

The Seamstress's Vision

If the French grisette and British sempstress played significant roles upon the urban panoramas of Paris and London, it is, more often than not, because they were viewed as gateways to fictional spaces dreamed up by authors or artists or else because they served as guides to the urban underworlds in which they were trapped. They were, in other words, products of the urban scene surrounding them, but rarely was their role in the production of city space considered or celebrated. As producers of fashion – which was, as I argued above, associated with dishonesty and disguise – these women were often depicted as falsifiers rather than the creators of a new reality. In Charles Dickens's "The Mistaken Milliner: A Tale of Ambition," published in *Sketches by Boz* (1836), the protagonist Amelia Martin illustrates how dressmaking and deceit go hand in hand. More than dresses, she sells the promise of social advancement to the neighborhood maids who buy clothes from her. Amelia's rhetoric is fairly transparent, and thus harmless, as far as sales pitches go, but Dickens goes to great lengths to portray the dressmaker as ridiculous since she fails to know – or remain in – her place. Like the maids she dresses, Amelia also dreams of changing her station in life, but rather than marry up, she wishes to

become a singer and thus enter into the society of artists. Dickens derides Amelia for her dream of fame, but one wonders why such a pursuit would have been portrayed as too obviously far-fetched. Nineteenth-century performers (like dressmakers) were, at best, ambiguously classed and the (social) leap from seamstress to singer was not so great as Dickens would have us believe. Indeed, Amelia's misstep is merely in believing that there *is* a great leap. While one could argue that this is a story that mocks all forms of female ambition, I think that it illustrates a more pessimistic view vis-à-vis a woman's ability to reshape their lives and the social hierarchies of the city. While men (such as talented male writers) could attain a position of social significance through a life of art, women were confined to their limited roles and confined spheres in the theater of urban life.[45]

When these women are imagined differently, however, a new vision of their role in the city emerges. Rather than writing off the women who produce and consume fashion as deceitful, Maria d'Anspach celebrates the *modistes* whose creative powers set trends and the customers who get themselves noticed by launching these new looks. If part of the city's modernity throughout the nineteenth century was due to its intense visuality – exemplified by the spectacle of consumable goods staged in the public spaces where people went to see and be seen – it becomes clear that women, and needlewomen in particular, played a role (howsoever ignored) in shaping that perception. D'Anspach's *modistes* recognize, however, that their visibility on the urban panorama is twofold: their

[45] While Dickens's treatment of women is, in general, more nuanced than his depiction of Amelia Martin would imply, I still think that it is a good illustration of the way in which he balks at the idea of a woman rising through the social ranks and making a name for herself in the city through art.

fashion-forward hats might enjoy the urban limelight as they circulate within the fashionable spheres of the city but, as types, modistes only come into their own through the men who write to – and about – them: "nos seigneurs, à nous, sont des dandys qui viennent nous regarder à travers les glaces du magasin, nous écrivent de forts belles lettres" (3:109). A dandy's love letter or a *flâneur*'s *physiologie* become one and the same as both use and, ultimately, disregard working women in the pursuit of the male author's creativity. This writing is, moreover, mere verbiage as far as these women are concerned as it leads to nothing: describing a love that is never acted upon (at least not in a way desired by the *modistes*), they are non-productive and presumably without point. Turning the tables on the notion of authorship, d'Anspach celebrates the creative powers exercised by the *modistes* themselves when, admiring a well-turned turban, the *première demoiselle* identifies herself as "l'auteur de ce chef-d'oeuvre" (109). Unlike the dandies' love letters, which may never even be read by the semi-literate *modistes*, the headpiece is destined to appear before a large audience, and thereby advance the "careers" of the socialite who wears it and the worker who has made it.[46]

While most other urban writers and artists situate the *modiste* in the world of commerce and capitalism, d'Anspach locates her *modistes* more firmly in the realm of art.[47] Surrounded by the objects (feathers, trimmings, and silk) associated with their

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[46] French grisettes were notoriously under-educated and the authors frequently mocked their attempt to write proper French. See, for example, Ida Gruget's letter in Balzac's *Ferragus* or Rigolette's in Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*.

[47] Looking at Degas' milliners, art historian Eunice Lipton emphasizes that they are, first and foremost, shown working: "The vividness of Degas' portrayal of these women as workers is enhanced by the pictures' evocation of commerce – the aura of buying and selling, the abruptness of encounters, the plethora of goods, the hardy, sensuous appetites." *Looking into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986) 154-155.

occupation, they walk a fine line between commercialization and creativity. These women may, like the bonnets they make, be had for a price but, ultimately, they are on par with the very men who observe (and judge) them: the writers of panoramic literature. Describing the origins of this urban type, d'Anspach argues that these women are the female counterparts to these men who, without wealth or connections, must also produce – or embellish urban life – in order to survive: "elle est devenue modiste, comme vous êtes peut-être vous-même devenu artiste, comme on devient aujourd'hui homme de lettres – faute de mieux, parce que cela est commode, n'engage pas l'avenir, et que c'est parfois un moyen d'arriver à quelque chose, quand on ne meurt pas en chemin de désespoir et de misère" (110). Clinging to the margins of fashionable society, both hack journalists and *modistes* are thus interstitial figures upon the urban panorama. While these types may have entertained ambitions of distinguishing themselves by the artfulness of what they produced, both tended to share the same fate of perpetual obscurity and anonymity within Paris. But as city dwellers with dreams of reshaping their surroundings, both figures could escape their hackneyed categorization as types. Describing the *modistes* at the end of their workday, d'Anspach has them scatter across the city as "elles vont ainsi dans la vie chacune par un chemin différent" (3:112). Granting these women different paths, d'Anspach refuses to confine them to a particular type or a confined urban space. If we are to insist on viewing these women as conduits to a certain experience of urban life, then, d'Anspach makes it clear that they can only be followed via the imagination and that the fictional city that emerges when following these women will be one of the reader's own making.

Seamstresses were both products and producers of their urban environments and, as fictional types, they opened up spaces within the city that allowed for alternate stories about metropolitan life to be rehearsed. That is to say that, even though they were distinctly urban – with connections to the city that eluded many readers – they nevertheless proposed an alternative to the dominant urban value system. This was, in fact, the reason grisettes, in particular, dominated the Parisian panorama, according to Baxter, for "her attraction is in her patent fictionality. As a representation she is doubly fictional insofar as she is understood as outside commerce, outside bourgeois morality, but exists exclusively for bourgeois consumption" (30). As part of the story that city dwellers apparently liked to hear incessantly repeated, grisettes and sempstresses appeared in the urban print culture as guides to these alternative versions of Paris and London. So while needlewomen were urban constants, grisettes and sempstresses evoke a particular time and specific spaces that were always already contained within a nostalgic narrative of city life.

Chapter 2: Portrait of the Young Artist as a Grisette

If one were to map nineteenth-century Paris as it was produced within the popular imagination, several new sights and spaces would likely appear besides the familiar landmarks dotting the official city guides. One space to be charted alongside the banal streets and predictable monuments would have to be Paris's bohemia, which was, of course, just as much a product of a particular time and cultural *zeitgeist* as it ever was an actual location. Indeed, the *where* – which can be said to loosely overlap Paris's Latin Quarter – seems, at least on one level, easier to pin down than the *when* related to this fictional space. That bohemia, moreover, was a particularly Parisian phenomenon is made clear by Henry Murger, the celebrated scribe of this world of art, who maintains that "la Bohème n'existe et n'est possible qu'à Paris."[1] Looking at bohemia as both a clearly demarcated Parisian neighborhood *and* an ephemeral site of nostalgia, which is only ever vaguely defined as a period in the male artist's past, this chapter considers the role that women played in constructing this urban space.[2] Although I argue that women were marginal – though highly visible – figures in the bohemia that emerges from the pages of popular novels throughout the nineteenth century, their significant contribution to the wider cultural concept of bohemia is clear, for as Elizabeth Wilson maintains, "from the

[1] Henry Murger, *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* 1851 (Paris: Gallimard, 1988) 34.

[2] Bohemia is, of course, nothing if not a contested space. Some critics, like Jerrold Seigel view it as a nineteenth-century social phenomenon that was quite distinct from the way in which it was constructed by artists and writers of the same period. Since what I am investigating is essentially a literary bohemia, I adopt the view of it that was promoted within the novels, sketches, and plays produced by the very artists who identified (at least in their youth) as bohemians.

1830s onwards, generations of bohemian women who had rejected the protection of the traditional family, carved out meaningful roles for themselves in the alternative world of the arts."[3] Bohemia may have been a space where identities were consistently renegotiated, but I wish to consider the roles imposed upon – rather than adopted by – the women in several of the widely popular novels that chronicled the adventures of bohemian artists.

Bohemia, as it appeared in the popular press, was a space where the family unit broke down and male-female bonds were replaced by the homosocial connections between men. Women thus found themselves marginalized in this world of non-reproductive creation. Grisettes were particularly limited types on display within bohemian texts, serving rather transparently as guideposts leading the reader through the young artist's progress. A grisette's love was, in other words, a sign of one's entrance into bohemia, and her inevitable death spelled expulsion from this liminal space as the mature artist embarked upon a successful career that earned him recognition in the wider art community and city at large. Looking at the way in which this somewhat generic urban figure took on new meanings as she was inserted into various versions of bohemia, this chapter analyzes the way in which the grisette embodied a romanticized experience of the city that was enjoyed by young men embarking upon their professional lives. As participants in bohemia, these women were aestheticized figures and potential artists but, as grisettes, they were written into the far more limiting roles of muse and mistress.

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[3] Elizabeth Wilson, *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2000) 85.

Instead of viewing bohemia as a site of possibility, as it clearly is in Wilson's account, I consider it as a product of past that encapsulates the lost youth of the mature artist. Framing bohemia a necessary phase of the male artist's life, Murger describes it as the point from which all must depart: "aujourd'hui comme autrefois, tout homme qui entre dans les arts, sans autre moyen d'existence que l'art lui-même, sera forcé de passer par les sentier de la Bohème" (34). This male-centric view of the Parisian art world is noteworthy because the space that Murger depicts is nevertheless a world full of women. Like the panoramic texts investigated in the previous chapter, novels celebrating Paris's bohemia – notably works by Murger and British author George Du Maurier – describe the city as a site of male education (as artists, like the urban observers, must study the world around them in order to fulfill their destinies as mature masters of their fields) that is nevertheless teeming with working-class women who both lend a sense of "local color" to the urban scenery and serve as muses to the painters and poets who capture the beauty of their age through their depictions of the city's working women. Indeed, if the earlier urban guides, sketches, and *physiologies* illustrated how to *be* Parisian, these novels defined how one was to be an artist in Paris – and being an artist necessarily entailed involvement with a grisette. In both kinds of texts, moreover, grisettes were identically framed as conduits to an idealized experience of the city. The primary difference is, of course, that, while seamstresses were placed upon the Parisian panorama by authors and artists trying to make sense of contemporary urban concerns, the grisettes created by Murger and Du Maurier belonged to a Paris that no longer existed. So while the grisette, as a type, was a relatively short-lived phenomenon and, indeed, was frequently depicted

as a figure on the verge of extinction, this is the only chapter that analyzes her as an urban legend rather than as an emblem of pressing urban preoccupations.

Bohemia may have been peopled by fictional – or even idealized – female figures, but it was constructed by real men claiming to look back upon their younger selves and companions. It is, in fact, this murky mix of reality and fantasy that compels us to return to this space as a field of study for, according to historian Mary Gluck, "the real interest of bohemia for posterity resides in the fact that it was also a myth about the artist's life invented by artists and mediated, perpetuated, and reinvented by popular culture."[4] The grisette is, of course, part of that myth as she was one of the primary reasons that this space – defined as it was by struggle, poverty, and social marginality – had such appeal in the world beyond the art community. She is, according to Jules Janin, the consolation of the young men still hovering on the metaphorical outskirts of city life: "La grisette est la providence de cette race à part et imberbe, l'honneur, l'esprit et le tapage de nos écoles, qu'on peut appeler à bon droit le *printemps de l'année*; … tout jeune homme qui vit à Paris d'une maigre pension paternelle et d'espérance est de droit le vainqueur et le tyran de ces jolies petites marquises de la rue Vivienne."[5] If Janin insists on the connections formed between grisettes and the youthful would-be conquerors of Paris, it should be made clear that – throughout the 1840s – to be young, in love with a grisette, and in Paris was tantamount to adopting some form of artistic identity.[6] So that the law and medical

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[4] Mary Gluck, *Popular Bohemia: Modernism and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005) 15.
[5] Jules Janin, "La Grisette," *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* 8 vols. (Paris: Curmer, 1843) 1: 10.
[6] The novels I consider take place during this time, although George Du Maurier's *Trilby* was written during the 1890s.

students filling both the Latin Quarter and urban literature of the time might have been preparing themselves for careers that would situate them comfortably in the bourgeoisie, but, by taking a grisette as a lover, they were pledging their – temporary – alliance to the romanticized world of art and idealism that defined the Parisian bohemia.

The grisette can thus be rather callously read as a rite of passage, used by the hordes of young and idealistic men pouring into Paris to began their studies and then abandoned once their studies were over, their idealism forgotten, and their careers begun. There were, of course, men who never fully lost their idealistic views of art's possibilities and these were the ones, depicted by Murger and Du Maurier, who left youth behind only through the necessary (because liberating) death of the grisette. Like the bohemia in which they were situated, grisettes only ever were nostalgic memories for the men who created them and, as a type, had to remain buried in the past, according to Seigel, who argues "that the *grisette* was already receding into the past in the 1840s tells us what kind of myth hers was. A fantasy image constructed out of the misunderstanding of one sex and class by another, it had to be projected into the past because it found few opportunities for realization in the present."[7] Moreover, whereas men had to prove – through art or ideals – their right of entry into bohemia, grisettes were written into, and thus inseparable from, this contested space. If I locate the grisette in this idealized bohemia, where the young men of Paris nurtured their hopes and dreams before exposing them to the harsher environment of the city, other critics, such as Victoria Thompson, view this type as an example of how one could reside in bohemia while still dealing with

[7] Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930* (New York: Viking, 1986) 42.

the exigencies of the literary marketplace: "writers were interested in the grisette because her life story offered a model of how to deal with the temptations of the marketplace. Journalists and authors of popular literature thus used the image of the grisette as a means of exploring their own professional and political identities."[8] Modeling themselves on the grisette (who gave, rather than sold, her body to lovers), journalists could, according to Thompson, be both artists *and* sellers of art. While it is possible that the grisette appealed to artists – who, for the most part, only ever enjoyed a precarious position in Paris during the July Monarchy (1830-1848) – as a symbolic bridge between the worlds of art and of necessity, I am interested in the very different vision of the grisette that emerges from the pages of bohemian literature. This grisette is less a model and more a barometer, as she appeared as a measure of the male artist's progress both in and, eventually, out of bohemia.

Analyzing representations of grisettes in texts by Henry Murger and George Du Maurier, I first wish to pause over one of the unanswered questions associated with this type: if grisettes were, by all accounts, fictional types defined primarily by their status as workers, what is the nature of the work performed by bohemia's women? I do not mean, of course, the actual sewing, flower selling, dying, laundering, hat-making, etc, that supported Paris's real working-class women, but, rather, I wish to consider why the female consorts to bohemia's male artists were necessarily workers. It is, of course, a

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[8] Victoria E. Thompson, *The Virtuous Marketplace: Women and Men, Money and Politics in Paris, 1830-1870* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2000) 17. Thompson views the grisette as an extended metaphor used to illustrate how one could be a part of the market economy without being corrupted by it. This was particularly important for male journalists, she argues, who wished to sell their work without having to "sell out." This reading is, of course, just one among many possible interpretations of this urban type as numerous literary portraits of grisettes contradict the disinterestedness that Thompson sees as a defining characteristic of this figure.

routine assumption, according to David Harvey, as "it was customary, for example, for the large numbers of students from the provinces to take mistresses, thus giving rise to the curious profession of grisette."[9] Even this explanation, however, conflates the status of lover and worker, and raises the question of why men from the bourgeoisie entered bohemia through companionship with working women rather than, for example, female artists. Objecting to the invisibility of said female artists in the popular depictions of bohemia, Wilson views the omnipresent grisette as a refusal to admit women into this "brotherhood" of artists as "the legendary coupling … of the bohemian with the *grisette*, rather than with a woman who was herself an artist and writer, was an insulting denial of female creativity" (92). This accusation, of course, denies the grisette's potential for creativity and, moreover, I believe it ignores the more interesting questions vis-à-vis the nature of this figure's work.

Work matters insofar as it provides the necessary independence that allowed women to live free of the constraints placed upon them by family ties. It is, of course, undeniable that, as workers, these women would have been viewed as sexually available by men on either extreme of the social spectrum. And, as we shall see, bohemia's working women were often barely distinguishable from prostitutes, so that the line between work and sex was, at best, contested and, in some cases, impossible to distinguish altogether. That said, I would like to separate the question of labor from the notion of sex to look at the role that grisettes played as workers – rather than as sexual companions – in Paris's bohemia. Work did not necessarily promote gender equality in

[9] David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 187.

this world where many men dabbled in art and idealism for a time before they adopted more grown-up roles in bourgeois social and professional circles, but it did give women a certain mobility that was denied to their more financially dependent counterparts. Moving about the city in the course of their jobs, grisettes were often better informed than the men whose garrets they shared and, if they could not escape bohemia as freely as their male lovers, they could at least circulate within this narrow space as they wished and willed. When they were in the position to act as arbiters between bohemia and the rest of Paris, they were the ones that made the lifestyle so romantic, the ones who created and launched the bohemian fashions, and the ones who are remembered today primarily as the movement's muses that enabled men to represent their day and age in art.

The popularity of grisettes and bohemia within a dynamically changing nineteenth-century Paris has garnered extensive critical attention, but few scholars have considered how these two fictional concepts worked with (and, indeed, against) each other to create a thoroughly modern vision of the city. Indeed, both the grisette and bohemia were viewed as the portals through which one could enter more fully into the precarious (but thrilling) urban world and, together, they signified the transformation of the young, often provincial, man into the more experienced city dweller. The very modernity of these fictional urban features should strike us as ironic, however, given the fact that both bohemia and grisettes were frequently depicted within a Paris of the past, or a Paris that can only ever be remembered but never revisited. By projecting their idealism into the past – or, more vividly, onto the bodies of dead grisettes – male artists could participate in the social and economic circles of the city without having to renounce their

earlier disdain for these very groups. As foundational stories rehearsed by men who only briefly flirted with social marginality, grisettes served as fictional constructs that allowed these men to inhabit (howsoever briefly) a world where art mattered and, indeed, where it was the center of the universe.

La jeunesse n'a qu'un temps: The Death of the Grisette in *Scènes de la vie de bohème*

Bohemia – as a popular, cultural construction – only ever seemed to come in to focus as artists and writers were leaving it behind. Indeed, it would seem that bohemia *had* to be renounced before its young inhabitants could be launched into the public eye and officially recognized as bohemians. In his 1851 collection of sketches of Parisian life *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, Henry Murger recounts the adventures of a tight-knit group of male artists who police the boundaries of bohemia until they realize that the only way to profit from their association with this space is to transcend its borders. Indeed, Murger's narrative is, above all else, a tale about packaging the bohemian lifestyle for popular consumption, which necessarily tempered some of its counter-discursive elements as, according to Gluck, "Murger's stories not only affirmed, but also neutralized, the radical potential of the bohemian life" (18). First published as a series of short and largely disconnected sketches in the small journal *Le Corsaire-Satan* from 1845-1849, Murger's stories initially circulated among a limited audience as they were read and seemingly appreciated by those already initiated into the bohemian lifestyle they depict. It was only in 1849, when the sketches were transformed into a play (with the collaboration of Théodore Barrière) and performed at the Théâtre des Variétés that

bohemia became widely recognized as a particularly Parisian phenomenon.[10] So while bohemia is essentially a position of social marginality, Murger had to simultaneously repudiate and repackage it in order to serve it to an urban audience eager to consume it.

While Murger's text is, first and foremost, about the trajectory of young male artists as they self-consciously flit about the margins of recognized society before transitioning into more mainstream roles, I am interested in the women who share this space (howsoever briefly) with them. Although frequently lumped into the single category of "grisettes," the women in Murger's bohemia include grisettes (defined by the canonical traits of disinterestedness and hard work), *lorettes* (kept women only a bit more independent than courtesans), actresses, and writers. These are shaky categories, at best, as women seem to slip in and out of various identities throughout the sketches. While critical attention frequently falls to the grisettes and *lorettes* of Murger's text, I would like to first consider the presence of female artists in this novel, which throughout frames bohemia as a select club that is wary of admitting newcomers. Looking at the appearance (or non-appearance, as the case may be) of an actress, Sidonie, and a writer, who is known only by the name of her lover Colline, in the text, a nuanced view of a "woman's place" in this slice of bohemia begins to emerge. Sidonie – the lead actress at the Luxembourg Theater – only appears in a single sketch although she seems to enjoy a far more visible position in the larger Parisian art world than the denizens of Murger's select

[10] Murger's invented bohemia continues to exert an influence on perception of Paris's early nineteenth-century art scene, most notably through the popularity of Giacomo Puccini's 1896 opera based on his text. There are, moreover, different versions of bohemia created with each new rendition of Murger's original text, so that the space made visible by the sketches has, in many ways, little resemblance to the romantic worlds depicted in the play and opera. My focus, however, is on the 1851 regrouping of the sketches in book form as this is a bohemia composed of down-and-out artists (rather than slumming bourgeois men) and the women who pass in and – quite frequently – out of their lives.

cénacle. Indeed, as a recognized persona of the theater world, she is in a position to help the struggling artists and she even manages to get one of Rodolphe's plays staged: "comme elle était un peu *maîtresse* au theater, elle promit à Rodolphe de lui faire recevoir sa pièce" (108). The extent of her role in the theater is, of course, open to interpretation since – as *maîtresse* – she could be either a "master" performer or a literal mistress, or, very likely, both at once. So even as Sidonie enters into Murger's bohemia as an artist, her privileged position in this space is linked to her relationships formed with men and not altogether tied to her artistic labor.

If Sidonie's evolution from obscure bohemian to recognized artist is a result (in part) of her association with men, her success is not necessarily a sign of female dependency, as men can also use women in order to better their own artistic and economic positions. Rodolphe's play, for example, is nothing if not a collaborative effort between the playwright and the actress who performed in it *and* pleaded its case before the theater's producers. This brief glimpse of the interactions between Rodolphe and Sidonie seems to indicate that there is, in fact, a place for female artists in bohemia, but Murger does not decide to linger there. Rather, the artistic work of women happens "off stage," so to speak, and out of view. The artists' mistresses, for example, play a prominent – though non-artistic – role in the text, with one notable exception. Madame Colline is never named, viewed, or heard of in any of the sketches except when readers are told that she is too busy working to join the gathered group of bohemians who are enjoying a moment of leisure: "quant à madame Colline, qu'on ne voyait jamais, elle était comme toujours restée chez elle, occupée à mettre des virgules aux manuscripts de son

époux" (175). She is hidden from readers, excluded from social gatherings, and even marginalized in her work, since she is not depicted as a writer in her own right but, rather, as an insignificant sort of editor. If Rodolphe's play is a clear example of male-female collaboration, Colline's manuscripts are the product of a far murkier sort of partnership, wherein the man is the recognized writer and the woman is the unseen and unnamed helper. This obviously exploitative arrangement highlights the extent to which women – Sidonie being the sole exception – do, in fact, rely on their sexual relationships with men to enter into Murger's world of art.

As artistic contributors, collaborators, and creators, Madame Colline and Sidonie seem to be rightful inhabitants of bohemia, but Murger shows that they in fact occupy this space as exceptional women rather than the rule. Indeed, the majority of women peopling Murger's bohemia are not artists or authors but, rather, low-paid workers or kept women. And, more often than not, women shuffled back and forth between these alternate roles, becoming grisettes when they supported themselves through their own labor and *lorettes* when they lived off of others. While the popular *physiologies* and urban tableaux may have divided these women into two separate camps, Murger shows that such distinctions are temporary, at best, as this group of women (who were often defined by their sexual – if not financial – independence) moved frequently in and out of jobs and relationships. Whatever their employment status, then, bohemia's women were marginalized by the irregularity of their professional and sexual identities. Indeed, often known as *femmes isolées*, they were, according to Joan Scott, exposed to certain assumptions since "the interchangeable usages of *femmes isolées* suggested that all such

working women were potential prostitutes, inhabiting a marginal and unregulated world in which good order – social, economic, moral, political – was subverted."[11] The grisette – famously a type that freely gave, and never sold, her love – was only ever a romantic ideal, and, as such, she did not really fit into Murger's bohemia of hardscrabble types.

Full of compromising characters – such as men who defend their artistic ideals, on one hand, only to gladly paint advertisements, on the other – the sketches profile a single grisette who serves as a "true" representative of her type. In order to include the grisette in this collection of tales obviously set in Paris of the 1840s, however, the narrator had to go back in time, and Francine's story is the only one that is narrated after the death of the protagonist. Indeed, the tale unfolds in the manner of an archeological dig, as the narrator sifts through various memories and other mental detritus before Francine, Jacques, and their story of doomed love finally emerge. Projecting Francine into the past, Murger highlights the extent to which, as an urban type, she is no longer contemporary and, as a cheerful worker, she is no longer possible. Compellingly enough, however, her tale of romantic love begins and ends in the most realistic space enclosed within bohemia: the hospital. As evidence of the sordid side of bohemian existence, the hospital is the menacing specter haunting all lower-class Parisians in urban literature but Murger, unlike most other writers, does not shy away from depicting it. Narrating the most sentimentalized of all the tales from within hospital walls, Murger grounds his urban love ballad in this gritty world that, ultimately, has no place for romantic love.

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[11] Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988) 143.

Even before they both succumb to disease and death, Jacques and Francine are not typical bohemians, as the sculptor divides his love between his art *and* his mistress, and the seamstress actually works. As a model grisette, Francine bears the drudgery of her poverty and profession cheerfully – "cette charmante créature traversa ainsi pendant cinq mois les misères de la vie de bohème, la chanson et le sourire aux lèvres" – whereas most of bohemia's women, according to Murger, rebel rather shrilly against the few pleasures and many privations associated with this space (282). For all her exceptionality (and indeed marginality) within Murger's sketches, Francine is nevertheless the embodiment of the ideal female bohemian type insofar as the public – eager for romance and disinclined to dwell on the murkier side of existence in the artists' slums – was ever concerned. Indeed, both the 1849 play and Puccini's opera conflate Mimi, Rodolphe's love interest, and Francine into a single character, thus disavowing the discontent and disloyalty that characterized the more complex figure. Moreover, if grisettes, such as Francine, had disappeared as a type, it is because the men who loved them had changed as well:

> Race disparue maintenant, grace à la génération actuelle des jeunes gens: génération corrompue et corruptrice, mais par-dessus tout vaniteuse, sotte et brutale. Pour le plaisir de faire de méchants paradoxes, ils ont raillé ces pauvres filles à propos de leurs mains mutilées par les saintes cicatrices du travail, et elles n'ont bientôt plus gagné assez pour s'acheter de la pâte d'amandes. Peu à peu ils sont parvenus à leur inoculer leur vanité et leur sottise, et c'est alors que la grisette a disparu. C'est alors que naquit la lorette. Race hybride, creatures impertinentes, beautés médiocres, demi-chair, demi-onguents, dont le boudoir est un comptoir où elle débitent des morceaux de leur coeur, comme on ferait des tranches de rosbif. (311).

While it is fairly obvious why Francine could be regarded as a more appealing character than the *lorettes* who replaced her, the fact that Murger never painted her as a living

figure within his dynamically shifting bohemia is a sign that such fixed types have no place in this space that requires a good deal of flexibility in order to survive. Francine illustrates, in fact, the impossibility of stasis in this environment, as those inhabiting bohemia must strive, succeed, and be lifted out of this obscure space or else they inevitably sink deeper and deeper into it, get impossibly mired, and then die. Jacques's lament as Francine is buried – "O ma jeunesse! c'est vous qu'on enterre!" – is, of course, the bohemian's swan song that expresses the inevitability of leaving this space (and its women) behind in the natural course of growing up (291).

If I insist on examining the minor female characters that appear only briefly before disappearing entirely in *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, it is because, for Murger, there is no single female bohemian type. So although he focuses on women who could best be defined by the term *lorette* (an ambiguous designation at best), Murger gestures towards the other kinds of women that share space in this sometimes transcendent, often tragic, bohemia. That said, this is a text that focuses, first and foremost, on the trials and triumphs of a circle of men who enter and exit bohemia as a self-contained group. Women may, in other words, ride out the turbulent days (and nights) of artistic self-becoming with them, but, in the end, they must leave or be left behind before their lovers can enter into the next stage of their development. Cast in supportive roles vis-à-vis their bohemian boyfriends, Musette and Mimi can be read as the anchors that hold Marcel and Rodolphe in this transitional space. Released from these relationships, the artists are free to exit from this self-imposed obscurity in order to enjoy greater professional visibility and success in the city. These women are not, however, confined to bohemia and, just as

they tie their artist lovers to this space, they too are stuck within it only insofar as they remain with Marcel and Rodolphe. This mobility is a key characteristic of Murger's hybrid types, according to Alain Lescart, who attributes their flexibility as figures to the fluidity with which they can move about Paris: "Murger fait débuter sa mi-grisette, mi-lorette, dans le quartier Latin, puis il la conduit vers le quartier Breda; ensuite, cependant, il la ramène dans le giron de la vie des artistes Bohème, malgré ses infidélités continuelles."[12] This back and forth movement in and out of bohemia speaks, in fact, to the relative freedom enjoyed by these women who, like their lovers, experience bohemia as a form of idealism that can be entered and abandoned as needed.

While Sidonie and Francine have clear work identities that are distinct from their roles as mistresses, Musette and Mimi do not practice any obvious professions and are, in fact, characterized by the inconstancy with which they flit between locales, lovers, and livelihoods. Sharing the hand-to-mouth existence of their lovers (with occasional breaks), they are neither economically above nor beneath them. That is to say that, unlike the grisettes whose bourgeois lovers leave them in order to regain their rightful class status, Musette and Mimi seem more like partners than paramours. While Musette and Mimi do not perform any obvious sort of remunerative labor, they do serve a distinct function in the text and in the space of bohemia. As embodiments of the irregular lifestyle inherent to bohemia, they connect their lovers to this space (with all its perils and possibilities) better than any nebulous idealism vis-à-vis art ever could. Indeed, Seigel hypothesizes that the only reason Rodolphe stays with Mimi, in spite of her incessant complaints and numerous

[12] Alain Lescart, *Splendeurs et misères de la grisette: Évolution d'une figure emblématique* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008) 203.

infidelities, is because she keeps him connected to a lifestyle he is obviously outgrowing so that "the inferno Mimi creates for Rodolphe is a kind of artificially prolonged youth" (49). In love with Mimi not because he is young and carefree in Paris but, rather, to *remain* young and carefree, Rodolphe clings to his mistress in order to retain a rightful space in bohemia, which was, according to Seigel, "the self-conscious prolongation of an aroused state of passion and excitement, a loosening of the reins that life in respectable society placed on the free movement of fantasy" (50). Mimi's death, then, is both necessary and (in spite of the theatrical and operatic conflations) fundamentally unlike Francine's in that, as a type, Mimi is a believable sort of late-July Monarchy figure but, as a mistress, she is an impediment to Rodolphe's necessary maturation that must be removed so that the poet (and the plot) could move forward.

If Mimi is the final, fragile thread connecting Rodolphe to bohemia, she is also the one who enables him to prepare to leave it. Before they are irrevocably separated by Mimi's death, they are temporarily divided by Mimi's caprice and, finding inspiration in his abandonment, Rodolphe writes a poem that earns him both a degree of recognition as a legitimate artist and a much needed payment of 60 francs. Mimi may tie Rodolphe to a lifestyle that he finds stimulating and even inspirational, in other words, but it is only once she is gone that he can translate that experience into art. Rodolphe's poem, moreover, wins him both recognition amongst the city's literati *and* a repentant Mimi. Charmed to find herself the subject of a poem, she defies her new lover, goes back to work as a *fleuriste*, and reenters bohemia and Rodolphe's life. Inspiration is a short-lived phenomenon, however, and, while the torment Mimi produces can lead once to great

work, such a feat can rarely be repeated. Marcel and Musette learn, for example, that their love grows stale with repetition and liken it to bad art, stating that "nous avions l'air d'une mauvaise copie d'un chef-d'oeuvre" (394). Any bohemian relationship that extends past its expiration date (calculated, of course, rather vaguely) ends up sounding, it would seem, like a bad cliché. As enemies of mediocrity, the artists are forced to renounce stale old in order to produce new art.

While Marcel willingly moves away from Musette and toward new experiences and spaces, Rodolphe is literally stuck with Mimi, until her death releases him from her, his bohemian youth, and his marginal existence. Although Rodolphe perhaps fears that forsaking bohemia (and the woman who keeps him there) is akin to forsaking his artistic ideals, Marcel urges him to take a more balanced view as "la poésie n'existe pas seulement dans le désordre de l'existence, dans les bonheurs improvisés, dans les amours qui durent l'existence d'une chandelle, dans les rebellions plus ou moins excentriques contre les préjugés qui seront éternellement les souverains du monde" (375). Within a year of Mimi's death, all the men tied to Rodolphe's bohemian circle have "arrived," so to speak, exercising their chosen artistic professions through the official literary, musical, and painterly networks, proving that they do not need disorderly lifestyles in order to create. Moreover, it is not just the men who enjoy a post-bohemian life. Although Mimi is – like many typical Parisian grisettes – consumptive and, therefore, doomed, Musette lives on and only fully renounces bohemia when she decides to marry and embrace the staid life of the petit-bourgeois. The fact that all the text's major characters – except Mimi – escape bohemia unscathed and, indeed, in a better position than when they

entered it would have, of course, appealed to Murger's readers (and audience). Like any exotic locale, bohemia offered a promise of a freer, less constrained life without any of the dangers that real travel beyond the city would necessarily have entailed. By transforming bohemia into a journey – with a clear beginning and ending – Murger rendered it palatable, according to Macolm Easton, who maintains that "all these enticing visions of freedom were cooked up for a respectable audience, leading a regular life, which could have no inkling of the real boredom of existence on the fringe of society."[13] Having Rodolphe and his friends escape bohemia before boredom (or worse) sets in, Murger ends his bohemian tales not with a happy ending so much as a sense of a journey undertaken and – insofar as the principal characters are concerned – survived. And while Mimi may be the only one to have not made it out of Murger's bohemia alive, she nevertheless emerges as the sketches' most enduring – and well remembered – figure, as though, by dying, she supplied the necessary evidence that bohemia, as a space, existed, and, as a lifestyle, was possible only for a short time.

Trilby, the Malleable (Sometimes) Grisette

Single-handedly responsible for canonizing Paris – or, more specifically, the Latin Quarter – as the epicenter of bohemia, Henry Murger illustrates the extent to which this space took shape almost organically as like-minded working-class Parisians flocked to a single neighborhood in pursuit of a shared vision of art. Although Murger's bohemia quickly became the authoritative version against which all other bohemian chroniclers

[13] Malcolm Easton, *Artists and Writers in Paris: The Bohemian Idea, 1803-1867* (London: Edward Arnold Ltd, 1964) 122.

wrote, it is exceptional in two distinct ways: first, it is peopled by native Parisians and, second, it is full of women and men from humble class backgrounds. As word of bohemia spread beyond the Latin Quarter, it exerted a sort of magnetic attraction, pulling in young men from a variety of economic positions from all over Europe who wanted to dabble in art and social marginality in the name of "life experience." Looking at George Du Maurier's 1894 novel *Trilby*, I investigate how a different vision of bohemia unfolds around a group of solidly middle-class British expatriates whose sojourn in this space represents a clear break from – or, rather, pause in – the lives and responsibilities left behind and waiting to be resumed. Bohemia, as I have been arguing throughout this chapter, was never just a place, or network of streets and studios, and it is a grisette (the eponymous Trilby O'Ferrall) that initiates the three British men – Taffy, Sandy, and Little Billee – into this particularly Parisian lifestyle. If Murger, through the creation of Mimi, updated the grisette as a type to suit the changed needs and circumstances of urban life in the late 1840s, Du Maurier likewise revises this figure in order to conform to a very different – and far more British – set of standards. Trilby, in other words, is a distinctly mutable figure whose contribution to art is predicated on her French *grisette-ness* but whose role as the novel's sole love interest requires a distinct renunciation of all that is particularly French or working-class about her.

Like most other tales of bohemian life, *Trilby* is set in the past and is narrated from the perspective of someone who knows, in advance, how the story ends. As a memory – rather than experience – of bohemia, in other words, the narrative captures an extended look into a particular time and space that is always recognized as exceptional.

Indeed, Du Maurier's three artists realize that the Paris they are experiencing is not permanent nor would they themselves always be able to fit into it, as "they would try and express themselves to the effect that life was uncommonly well worth living in that particular city at that particular time of the day and year and century, at that particular epoch of their own mortal and uncertain lives."[14] It is worth noting, however, that these men were not born into bohemia, nor did they happen to stumble upon it. Instead, they sought it out, paid the price of admission (literally, through their liberal hospitality among other artists), and – from their rented, but cozy, quarters – they experienced the Parisian bohemia deemed necessary for their art. Their bohemia is never something that needs to be escaped or endured and they always have the option to retreat into their comfortable British lifestyles when necessary. Du Maurier's bohemia – full of middle-class men living out their artistic apprenticeships – would thus seem to have nothing in common with Murger's Paris of down-and-out types but for the presence of the working-class grisette. Indeed, Trilby is the a veritable focal point of class tension in the novel, as she is useful to the men's art insofar as she is a model and worker, but they long for her to be a "real lady" so that their love for her might be validated. Indeed, the problem – and appeal – of the grisette is that she appears to belong to both classes, as "she was so absolutely 'like a lady' that it seemed quite odd (though very seductive) to see her in a grisette's cap and dress and apron" (65). Trilby is inherently unlike the men who love her, however, as her residency in bohemia is not an extended vacation but, rather, a permanent position.

[14] George Du Maurier, *Trilby* 1894 (New York: Oxford UP, 1995) 26.

While the bohemia created by Taffy, Sandy, and Billee seems to be composed of contradicting elements – containing all the comforting features of home while also serving as a rupture from the constraints that the British home entails – Trilby is the point where all of their opposing desires break down. This carefully constructed world of respectability and reckless abandon, in other words, can only be experienced by men, but never a woman.[15] From the novel's beginning, with its pages-long description of every object filling the artist's studio rented by the three men, it becomes clear that this is a domesticated space – or an orderly little corner of bohemia – filled with coded objects that mark it as both home-like and artistic. This insistence on the thinginess of their surroundings is a symptom, according to critic Martha Banta, of the novel's many implausibilities for "this doting upon *things* is not only *not* a guarantee of the narrative's realism; it is the giveaway that the verisimilitude is included for the sake of fantasy."[16] As a composite space, however, the studio can be shaped by the men who inhabit it in a way that Trilby, of course, cannot molded to suit their desires.[17] Yet she too is described a strange assortment of composite parts that do not seem to add up to a coherent whole. She is both French (by residence) and English (by birth) and, whereas these "parts" seem

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[15] The constructions of masculinity in this novel are varied and complex. Billee, for example, is femininized throughout the text, displaying traits – like sensitivity, hysteria, and prudery – that are typically looked down upon as womanly. While it is not in the scope of this paper to investigate Du Maurier's treatment of the aesthete or even to look too closely into his gender reversals, I think it is important to view Trilby as a character who gets forced into (both literally, through hypnotism, and through gentler, more figurative, means) into adopting a more and more "feminine" persona.

[16] Martha Banta, "Artists, Models, Real Things, and Recognizable Types," *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 16.2 (1983): 20.

[17] Trilby's malleability is, of course, most frequently discussed in regards to Svengali's hypnotic power over her. While I do consider his role in the "shaping" of the grisette, I believe that the English men (and Little Billee, in particular) exert a more nefarious influence over her as they turn her into a willing participant in her own dismantling.

to coexist peacefully when she first enters the novel, it becomes clear that it is a delicate balance that, if disturbed, cannot be long maintained.

If bohemia is frequently depicted as a male-dominated space dedicated to the formation of male artists, Trilby enters the novel as a challenge to the exclusion of women in the creation of art.[18] Indeed, she seems to complicate gender categories altogether when she first shows up in the studio, wearing only a man's army jacket and petticoat, while on a break from a modeling job [figure 2.1]. This image, by Du Maurier, captures Trilby at the crossroads between several different identities: mixing masculine and feminine dress, she cannot be reduced to a single type as she enters the studio as an artist's model *and* friend. The naturalness with which she accepts her own oddities – her cross-dressing, her irregular profession, and her mixed cultural background – is a sign of her durability (as her malleability allows her to comfortably inhabit numerous urban spaces) *and* her vulnerability (as she belongs to no single space in particular). Indeed, if Du Maurier's bohemia is a far more pleasant place than Murger's, with its mix of artistic ideals and bourgeois comforts, Trilby is a proficient code-switcher (linguistically *and* socially speaking) who thrives in this hybrid space for, as critic Laura Vorachek argues, "Trilby's ability to adapt to her environment indicates she is prepared to survive in a varied and complex world."[19] As a thoroughly modern figure, Trilby adopts the loose dress codes and free and easy manner of bohemia, and attempts to coexist with its men as a friend and equal. This initial image of Trilby is quickly dismantled, however, by her

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[18] For more about this gendered exclusion, see Wilson, 92.
[19] Laura Vorachek, "Mesmerists and Other Meddlers: Social Darwinism, Degeneration, and Eugenics in *Trilby*," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 37 (2009): 201.

new companions – the three British artists and the German musician Svengali – who repeatedly (and quite violently) attempt to force into the far more limited roles of muse and lover.[20] As these men attempt to fix her into a single – distinctly feminine – type, she undergoes a slow, but radical, transformation as her dress becomes increasingly proper, her hair grows out, her freckles fade, and her jolly camaraderie is replaced by maternal solicitude.

As a model, Trilby can initially be anyone when posed before an easel only to slip back into her distinctive self – her "Trilbyness," as it is referred to throughout the novel – when the work is finished. Even the British trio – generally disapproving of her livelihood – paints her repeatedly, both in posed (though fully clothed) postures and, less formally, as she sits sewing buttons onto disheveled clothing or darning their socks. Drawn to Trilby as both a model and a grisette (or working-class female companion), they are nevertheless tempted to view her as a female equivalent of themselves – "a grande dame masquerading as a grisette" – or as someone whose sojourn in bohemia is only a temporary respite from real life (91). While the men only ever marginally succeed in separating Trilby, the English companion, from Trilby, the grisette, they utterly fail when it comes to covering up or condoning her sexual history. Indeed, all that they manage to do is transform her sexual frankness into a more "proper" feeling of sexual shame. So while Trilby is initially a thriving figure in Du Maurier's enticing bohemia, she begins to unravel as she learns to see herself through the eyes of others. This loss of

[20] The violence that Trilby suffers at the hands of her bohemian cohorts refers, of course, to the way in which Svengali eventually transforms her into La Svengali but also, and more subtly, to the way in which Billee forces his love upon her. By insisting that she love him back, he is, I argue, forcing her to give up any characteristics or past times that are particularly French, bohemian, or even working class.

Figure 2.1 George Du Maurier, *Trilby* 1894 (New York: Oxford UP, 1995) 14.

self is, of course, what *Trilby* is all about, as the grisette eventually falls under the influence of the brilliant – but cartoonishly wicked – musician Svengali, who hypnotizes her and turns the tone-deaf grisette into an internationally acclaimed opera star. While Svengali's assault on Trilby monopolizes the large majority of critical attention to the novel, it is nevertheless true that, before Svengali robbed the grisette of her voice, Little Billee (the most lovelorn of the trio) robs her of her self-respect.[21] Indeed, it is only once she repudiates her old carefree life that she becomes vulnerable to the hypnotist's power for, according to critic Fiona Coll, "mesmerism might help to account for how La Svengali sings as she does, but the larger narrative of a woman becoming stripped of her own individual subjectivity in the name of achieving a disciplined, proper, and productive being the world explains how Trilby becomes La Svengali in the first place."[22] Having squelched her quintessential "Trilbyness" when repudiating her bohemian existence, the grisette is emptied of all sense of self and is, in fact, only brought back to life when Svengali takes it over.

Just as Murger's Rodolphe needs Mimi's death to release him from bohemia, Little Billee and his friends find that Trilby's disappearance from Paris marks the end of

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[21] While Svengali (as a hideous caricature) has been analyzed by numerous critics – especially in light of Du Maurier's problematic anti-Semitism – I am far more interested in the first (and more effective/powerful) assault on Trilby. Instead, for example, of viewing the grisette's demise as a product of Svengali's manipulations, I consider it a clear result of Billee's desire to transform her into a suitable wife. Trilby is obviously a malleable and manipulated figure, but she does not passively adopt new identities, according to Nina Auerbach. Even when under Svengali's power, Trilby has made a conscious choice to follow the man she hates since she cannot have the man she loves. Viewing the novel as an exploration of Trilby coming into (and going out of) herself, one realizes that, according to Auerbach, "in drawing on ideals of the alluring vacuum of the uncultured woman waiting for the artist-male to fill her, du Maurier imagines powers that dwarf male gestures toward redemption and damnation." Nina Auerbach, "Magi and Maidens: The Romance of the Victorian Freud," *Critical Inquiry*, 8:2 (1981): 286.

[22] Fiona Coll, "'Just a singing-machine': The Making of an Automaton in George du Maurier's *Trilby*," *University of Toronto Quarterly: A Canadian Journal of the Humanities*, 79.2 (2010): 750.

their bohemian adventure. Unlike Mimi, however, who is only required to die once so that her lover may live on, Trilby suffers several "deaths" as the men who love her make their way into and out of bohemia. For example, even as Little Billee, Taffy, and Sandy embrace bohemia by welcoming Trilby and her coterie of male friends into their studio, they begin the process wherein the French grisette is transformed – through exposure to their speech, manners, and dress – into a more suitably British heroine. Her first "death" is thus complete when, realizing the impropriety of posing for the figure, Trilby forsakes modeling and becomes instead a *blanchisseuse de fin*, or washerwoman. Although she takes her body out of circulation among bohemia's studios, Trilby fails to satisfy Little Billee, who would eliminate the worker altogether in order to transform her into his wife. As he attempts to cram her into a more and more limited role, Billee essentially banishes Trilby from bohemia. Since he cannot accept her status as a worker and she cannot see past their social differences in order to become his wife, there is no place for her in the Parisian space she once dominated. Transformed yet again by Svengali, Trilby ultimately dissolves under the pressure of too many selves and the fatal dilution of what was her essential "Trilbyness."

While Trilby's disappearances (first from Paris and then into the hypnotized body of La Svengali) catapult Little Billee and Svengali into artistic fame, she does not die so that they might experience maturity and live. Rather, all three experience their removal from bohemia as a sort of death sentence, as Svengali dies of a heart attack, Trilby wastes away, and Billee succumbs to a prolonged illness. The grisette's death, in this case, does not release the artist from bohemia, but rather it is the loss of bohemia that kills the

grisette and the artists who love her. One is left wondering, then, if Du Maurier's bohemia was, in fact, a jumping off point to a bigger and better future. What if, in other words, Billee and Trilby could have remained together in bohemia? Had Billee married Trilby, he would, of course, have been cut off from most bourgeois social networks and forced to make a home in marginal urban spaces or removed rural locales such as the Barbizon forest in which he longs to live. Indeed, while the Latin Quarter was the stomping ground of young bohemians in the novel, Billee meets older artists in Barbizon living out an extended version of what seems to be the grown-up version of an idyllic bohemian lifestyle. There is the sense that, for all of Du Maurier's dreamy visions of a "bourgeois bohemia," such a space could never really exist except, perhaps, in the fantasies of the young artists who, in the end, do *not* marry the grisette and *do* return to the comfortable and conventional lifestyles they temporarily left behind. As an older Taffy and his wife discover, such a vision of bohemia is, in the end, barely worth revisiting: "they were tired, yawny, sleepy, and very sad; and each was thinking (and knew the other was thinking) that a week in Paris was just enough – and how nice it would be, in just a few hours more, to hear the rooks cawing round their own quiet little English country home" (301). With Little Billee and Svengali – who were, each in his own way, great artists – and Trilby – the quintessential bohemian grisette – dead and gone, there is no bohemia left to which one can return.

The Bohemian Marketplace

The combination of a young male artist, dying woman, and avant-garde art within a carnivalesque Paris was clearly a successful formula. So successful, in fact, that it is still being played out for twenty-first-century audiences, for whom the idea of bohemia necessarily entails the performance of doomed love against the picturesque background of Montmartre, such as one sees in films like the 2001 blockbuster *Moulin Rouge*. While the dramatic love story between the penniless artist and dying courtesan tends to take center stage, this is nevertheless a bohemia obsessed with, and driven by, money. Packaging an anti-capitalistic and anti-commercial lifestyle for mass consumption, recent chroniclers merely follow the footsteps of the first bohemians according to Wilson, who argues that "in the mutual attraction/repulsion of bohemian and bourgeois, mass culture acted as go-between, presenting tales of bohemian life to give the bourgeois public a vicarious thrill" (222). This is a bohemia, in other words, that puts itself up for sale even as it loudly proclaims art's ability to transcend pecuniary interests.

If I seem to insist on the important role played by money in contemporary, popular culture versions of bohemia, it is because it has influenced the type of women associated with this space. There are, it would seem, no grisettes in the Hollywood version of late nineteenth-century French bohemia, only courtesans.[23] And instead of dying to release their lovers from bohemia, these courtesans perish in order to more solidly entrench their lovers in this imaginary space of idealism and artistic purity. By the

[23] This evolution from grisette to courtesan (which is, as I point out, already present in Murger's *Sketches*) is never absolutely straightforward. Whereas Murger's women were proto-courtesans in the sense that they were occasionally kept women, the type that is featured in films like *Moulin Rouge* is more complex. Satine, for example, is first and foremost an actress and referring to her as a courtesan is tantamount to denying her artistry. There are, moreover, twentieth-century versions of the grisette-artist, or working-class women who adopt a bohemian lifestyle, such as one finds in Jean Renoir's 1954 film *French Cancan*.

twentieth-century, in other words, bohemia is no longer viewed as a temporary apprenticeship through which young artists must pass before assuming a more visible role in society but, rather, as a space devoted to the protection *and* promotion of all that is threatened by a consumerist society: love, art, and freedom. This new bohemia is not a refuge from bourgeois culture but, rather, a contradictory space that was at once an alternative to mainstream life and dependent upon middle-class consumers for its own survival. The courtesan is of course the embodiment of such a complex space: coveted by the bourgeoisie – who must pay for its access to her – she gives herself freely to the artist she loves. She is thus positioned as both commodity (to attract a bourgeois market) and reward for the artist who gains love at the cost of social insignificance. The bohemian courtesan cannot of course be simultaneously sold off and given away, and so, by dying, she preserves the delicate balance that keeps bohemia afloat. Whether they are called grisettes or courtesans, however, bohemia's women remain remarkably consistent as they live so that their lovers may produce art, and they die so that this art may enter the market.

PART 2: *THE MYSTERIOUS CITY*

Chapter 3: Workers and Wives as Legible Types in Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*

A man might or might not be what his clothes
proclaimed, but the proclamation was clear…
—Richard Sennett[1]

Strangers are not really conceived as individuals,
but as strangers of a particular type.
—Georg Simmel[2]

Collapsing appearance and identity, Rigolette – the perennially cheerful grisette in Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842-43) – catches up with an old friend through a glance at her apparel. Informing La Goualeuse that "c'est ta vocation de porter un bonnet de paysanne, comme la mienne de porter un bonnet de grisette," Rigolette responds naively to her friend's apparel as she relies on the metonymic function of clothing and accessories to announce La Goualeuse's occupation and consequent social standing.[3] Moreover, by demonstrating the extent to which sight and appearance (rather than speech) had become privileged modes of transmitting knowledge about people in the modern city, the grisette indirectly articulates the important role dress plays in projecting a coherent sense of self. In a novel that exposes and catalogues the underground sectors

[1] Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Vintage, 1974) 167.
[2] Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* Trans. Kurt Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950) 407.
[3] Eugène Sue, *Les Mystères de Paris* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1989) 833.

of Paris usually hidden from view, such interpretations of physical appearance seem indispensible as city dwellers strove to attribute a certain degree of legibility to the modern metropolis.

At first glance, Sue's Paris seems to be modeled on panoramic versions of the city created by the popular urban guides and widely distributed *physiologies* discussed in previous chapters. Products of the classifying mania that swept the literary world in the early half of the nineteenth century, these texts promoted a reliance on attire-based deductions which reduced people to appearances thought to be legible to the properly trained eye. Necessarily familiar with the typology of common urban figures created by popular literature of the 1830s and 40s, city dwellers would thus have been expected to associate certain physical traits (of dress or physiognomy) with indications of personality and profession.[4] Sue's Paris is, however, only problematically legible and Rigolette's quick physiognomic reading is thus rendered a misreading. And, by responding to what she *sees* rather than what *is*, she silences her friend who dares not contradict that which her own clothing so plainly, albeit deceitfully, declares. Indeed, appearances constitute unreliable – but irresistible – text in Sue's novel, as characters adopt disguises in order to insert themselves into otherwise inaccessible parts of the city. As Sue's title thus indicates, one has stepped into a very different Paris than the one projected within the

[4] My first chapter discusses in much greater length how this popular literature – in the form of *physiologies* and urban tableaux – claimed to describe and interpret the most prevalent figures seen in the urban environment only to end up reducing various groups of people into caricatures or types. Since most types were recognized by overt physical features (like the student's long hair), articles of dress (such as lady's maid's apron), or other objects (such as the milliner's hat box), readers would have known that such features and articles of dress served as a sort of shorthand broadcasting one's profession and social class.

physiologies, and, in the pages of this sweeping urban saga, the legible panorama has been replaced by a veritable labyrinth composed of mysterious strangers and spaces.

Looking into Sue's mysterious Paris, where no one is what they seem to be, this chapter considers how, and tries to interrogate why, the seamstress stands out as a legible type among a multitude of masked characters. Usually attired in the unofficial uniforms associated with their occupations, working women were, as I argue throughout this dissertation, notoriously legible and therefore particularly limited vis-à-vis their share of the metropolis. Showing how these women negotiate the space between the street (or prison) and the working-class home, I maintain that, in a novel full of disguised and deceitful characters, they are constrained by perceptions of them as a type. Working women, such as La Goualeuse and Rigolette, in other words, find the markings of geography, occupation, and class inscribed upon their bodies even as they move within (and beyond) the city and their former roles in it. Although the seamstress was frequently featured in urban literature as a fixed, and therefore limited, urban type, she enjoyed some degree of ambiguity, particularly in regards to her sexuality. By splintering the seamstress into two distinct types – the grisette and the prostitute – Sue, however, passes a distinct judgment on the sexuality of working women. Considering the impermeable boundary that Sue erects between these two types, I investigate how grisettes and prostitutes bear the burden of legibility in this Paris of deceit and disguise.

Reading a bonnet as insight into vocation and lifestyle, Rigolette captures two central, but seemingly contradictory, tenets of Sue's work. Bodies and their accessories always signify something, whether a profession, disposition, or moral outlook. The

adorned body can, however, become a site of dissimulation when inscribed with artificial signs in order to elude legibility or to deceive. Indeed, the performance of false identity was a trademark of urban modernity for, as Elizabeth Wilson maintains, "in the metropolis everyone was in disguise, incognito, and yet at the same time an individual more and more *was* what he wore."[5] The fact that city dwellers were, by and large, unknown to one another meant that people were forced to take strangers at face value, and Sue explores the effect of disguise on the overall legibility of the city, particularly as he attempts to introduce a heretofore invisible sector (the criminal underworld) to a literate, middleclass readership. Although people cannot help but look at others and draw conclusions based on what they see, Sue clearly warns against a too-naïve confidence in first impressions. Indeed, Sue regularly shows that, beneath the most predictable appearances, hide people capable of actions and transformations otherwise unsuspected by those familiar with the types they are supposed to represent. So while La Goualeuse's peasant attire is coded as respectable and allows her to pass for such before her uninformed friend, it merely conceals (but cannot contain) the branded body of a prostitute. Looking at the body as a palimpsest of inscribed meanings, then, this chapter explores the extent to which the preconceived notions regarding class and gender promoted by popular literature influence perception and complicate readings of bodies that wittingly express multiple (or even contradictory) things about the self.

Through La Goualeuse, a seamstress turned into a prostitute, then a peasant, and finally, however improbably, a princess, Sue destabilizes the legibility of urban identities

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[5] Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2003) 137.

in order to reveal the limitations inherent in classifying modern city dwellers based on sight alone.[6] By insisting on the malleability of appearance, Sue allows for the possibility of character reinvention even while consistently foregrounding the inevitable criminality associated with deceptive facades. Although La Goualeuse, forever tainted by the implications of impurity associated with prostitution, finds herself limited vis-à-vis her numerous transformations, Sue regularly challenges the static (but all too culturally prevalent) notions that limited the working woman to a simple and predictable type. Due to the relative anonymity of the city, certain urban figures within urban panoramic texts seem more capable than others of redefining themselves in order to suit their own (usual financial) ends. Working women – such as seamstresses – were most often reduced to their exploited bodies when represented in popular literature, as they were imagined to be either half-dead with overwork or else sexually compromised by less reputable means of generating income. Sue depicts, and decries, this exploitation, while simultaneously allowing his working women to defy some of the expectations associated with their type. Focusing on the dangers of city life rather than the "natural" proclivities of laboring women, Sue bases his working class characters on the types constructed by the popular *physiologies* only to complicate the assumption of feminine frivolity endorsed by this genre. Endowing his working class female characters with families, pasts, aspirations, and, most importantly, the ability to change, Sue offers a glimpse (howsoever fictionalized) of lower class Paris that seems to have been invisible to readers of the

[6] La Goualeuse goes by many names throughout the novel (La Pégriotte, Fleur-de-Marie, and Amélie) as she adopts a new name with each new identity. For the sake of clarity, however, I simply refer to her as La Goualeuse.

popular urban tableaux or the academic social inquiries best exemplified, perhaps, by Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet's 1836 work on prostitution.

If the authors of *physiologies* such as "La Grisette" or the more extensive urban guides like *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* seem intent on defining seamstresses as women of loose virtue, Sue squarely places blame for this questionable turpitude on the city. In opposition to many social commentators of the time, who insisted on interpreting the prostitute as a naturally debased creature, Sue endows his prostitutes – namely, La Goualeuse (the Street-Singer) and her fellow prison mate, La Louve (She-Wolf) – with a bourgeois respect for sexual purity and faithful monogamy and he eventually allows these women to attempt leaving behind shameful pasts in order to realize their more "authentic" and conventionally feminine natures.[7] Transformation for these women, however, comes at the cost of urban exile. In order to trade sexual servitude and economic vulnerability for tranquility and safety within the patriarchal family, La Goualeuse, La Louve, and even the virtuous Rigolette must leave the city behind in favor of more rural retreats. Indeed, all single (unmarried or widowed) women in Sue's Paris are vulnerable to the criminal plots hatched in the urban underworld and require the masculine protection of a father or husband.[8] The only women, in fact, who can navigate

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[7] See Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet, *De la Prostitution dans la ville de Paris, considérée sous le rapport de l'hygiène publique, de la morale et de l'administration* (Paris: J. –B. Baillière, 1836) 1: 99-102. Although Parent-Duchâtelet recognizes that poverty is the main impetus forcing many women into prostitution, he continually insists that the truly virtuous would find some other way of living, stating that "pour celles qui sont véritablement honnêtes, elles trouvent toujours des personnes qui s'intéressent à elles, qui leur procurent des places ou les moyens de retourner dans leurs pays" (1: 102).

[8] Sue was not alone in decrying both the vulnerability and inappropriateness of single women in the city. In what perhaps may be the most important text on laboring women written in France during the nineteenth-century, Jules Simon argues that such feminine independence is unnatural, stating that "s'il y a une chose que la nature nous enseigne avec évidence, c'est que la femme est faite pour être protegée, pour vivre,

the city unchaperoned and unharmed are those who – like the villainous La Chouette, La Goualeuse's childhood guardian and tormenter – are responsible for the dangers associated with urban life. Examining the tendency to expel working women from the city in order to "save" them, this chapter considers Sue's difficulty in reconciling women to the realities of urban life even as he insists on rewriting the seamstress as a key figure of the metropolitan landscape.

With its archetypal cast of well-known urban figures, *Les Mystères de Paris* begins like a *physiologie* – a cheaply printed booklet featuring the urban highlights and characters of the July Monarchy – but this naïve simplicity is challenged as Sue attempts to understand and address the root causes of urban poverty.[9] While the techniques of character description modeled by the *physiologies* are undoubtedly limited, these texts seem to have encouraged people to believe that, with sufficient clues, the social could be made visible and therefore decipherable. According to Judith Lyon-Caen, French novels of the 1830s and 40s shared this impulse to decode the urban panorama and used many of the same methods endorsed by the *physiologies* and other social surveys.[10] Borrowing the familiar characterizations promulgated by popular panoramic literature, Sue's novel

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jeune fille, auprès sa mère, épouse, sous la garde et l'autorité de son mari." Jules Simon, *L'Ouvrière* (Paris: Hachette, 1861) 77.

[9] Many critics have discussed the shift in the text as it veers away from a conventional urban melodrama into one that interrogates and addresses the problems faced by the working poor. There is a tendency among certain critics to view this shift as a result of the numerous readers' letters Sue received which encouraged him to continue following the socialist bent of the novel. See Christopher Prendergast, *For the People by the People? Eugène Sue's* Les Mystères de Paris*: A Hypothesis in the Sociology of Literature* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003), for a full discussion of this novelistic "turn" and its possible causes.

[10] Judith Lyon-Caen, "Le romancier, lecteur du social dans la France de la Monarchie de Juillet," *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle* 24 (2002): 16, 20. Addressing Sue's apparently dramatic conversion from dandy to socialist, Lyon-Caen proposes looking at him as a social observer caught up with the themes of social transparency prevalent in Paris during the 1830s and 40s. David Harvey, too, maintains that writers of these early decades used literature to make sense of rapid urban change (25).

contains a vast assortment of recognizable types – including, of course, the grisette, which (along with the *flâneur*) was the most emblematic of the new urban identities – and the instant connotations of class, power, and sexual availability implied by these figures. The novel is not, however, a *physiologie* and it turned out that a public hungry for social legibility was even more avid for a good mystery. Walter Benjamin, observing this shift in popular taste, maintains that cloudiness rather than clarity appealed to readers, as "the soothing little remedies that the physiologists offered for sale were soon outmoded. On the other hand, the literature concerned with the disquieting and threatening aspects of urban life was destined for a great future." [11] Unaccounted for, however, are the ways in which mystery novels relied on the conventions established by the literary genre they replaced. Indeed, in Sue's novel, people only ever become mysterious when they fail to conform to their physiological types. By blurring the line between virtuous and debased characters – exposing the hypocrisy of those whose upright reputations rely on deception and, conversely, insisting on the innate purity of some of the women forced into prostitution – Sue challenges the notion of the city as a legible space even as he attempts to strip off disguises in order to expose the guilty and reward the good.

While Paris during the July Monarchy (1830-1848) was undoubtedly dangerous and bewildering for the hordes of provincial newcomers who came to the capital seeking education or employment, as well as for the residents who watched as their neighborhoods were reshaped by the presence of these new inhabitants, the mysteries that plague Sue's Paris result largely from the fact that people are not what they seem. City-

[11] Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, Trans. Howard Eiland et al. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2006) 71.

dwellers were particularly vulnerable to such a disconnect between appearance and reality since, according to sociologist Louis Wirth, "the urban world puts a premium on visual recognition. We see the uniform which denotes the role of the functionaries and are oblivious to the personal eccentricities that are hidden behind the uniform. We tend to acquire and develop a sensitivity to a world of artefacts and become progressively farther removed from the world of nature."[12] In Sue's Paris, trusting the visual codes of urban uniforms has profound consequences since the most benign appearances hide menacing impulses, making it all but impossible to trust one's senses when dealing with others across all realms of society. If disguised characters are dangerous, it is not only because of their criminal behavior but, rather, because they appear innocent. Behind closed doors, for example, a notary known for excessive probity and piousness is, in fact, a hedonistic voluptuary. A prostitute, though repentant, deceives those who believe in her virginal appearance. And a foreign prince roams the city disguised as a humble worker to better spy on the obscurely virtuous and secretly guilty. The numerous characters and plots of the novel are tenuously connected through this disguised German prince, who, however improbably, is a perfect social chameleon. Whether consorting with murderers and thieves in *la Cité* or attending high society balls, Rodolphe is equally at home in his various roles and with his diverse companions. Moreover, while false appearances often cloak the novel's hypocritical characters or provide cover for those with something to hide, Rodolphe's various transformations mark, albeit questionably, the limit of acceptable deception.

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[12] Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," *The American Journal of Sociology* 44.1 (1938): 14.

Sue's novel opens with Rodolphe's descent into the Parisian underworld, where he encounters the caricaturized criminals and social outcasts that make up this universe of "types hideux, effrayants" (31). In spite of this reduction of individuals into types, Sue clearly departs from the descriptions found in *physiologies* (which tend to depict banal and often humorous city dwellers) with his choice of subjects – prostitutes, thieves, and murderers – that comprise the invisible, but ubiquitous, metropolitan inhabitants. Even expected, and presumably predictable, urban figures – such as the grisette – are rendered somewhat sinister by Sue's insistence on the very thin line separating them from illicit and far less appealing types. By showing, for example, how easily a carefree grisette could become one of the debased women housed in the Saint-Lazare prison, he challenges the stability of the divide between the legitimate and underground sectors of Paris. Furthermore, even while he is touting physiognomic interpretation as a reliable source of information about others, he undermines his endorsements through situational context. When Rodolphe, for example, appears at the *tapis-franc* dressed in the humble clothes of a worker, he is subjected to overt visual inspection since, according to Sue, "pour reconnaître leurs pareils, les bandits, comme les honnêtes gens, ont un coup d'oeil sur" (45). If this assertion were true, however, the presence of a prince would presumably stand out and cause a stir among criminals anxious to evade police, informants, and even each other. Indeed, if people were so transparent or even remotely this penetrating, Paris would not be mysterious at all. Rodolphe's ability to slip past the watchful gaze of suspicious onlookers indicates not only the failure of physiognomic profiling, but also attests to the power of his physical and financial strength. Winning a street fight, then

offering to treat his defeated opponent to dinner, Rodolphe enters the criminal underworld in Paris through a commanding, rather than merely legible and conforming, appearance. His mastery of multiple urban codes, moreover, enhances his ability to tweak his performances to suit his various (and ever changing) audiences.

As a bridge between the high and low segments of Paris, Rodolphe acts as both the novel's *flâneur*-figure, as he is the ultimate observer of city life, as well as an authorial stand-in, since his interventions in the lives of others shape the narrative. Because Rodolphe is the reader's guide to Paris's underworld, his observations of urban crime (as well as its solutions) and his assessment of the vulnerability of the working poor take authoritative center-stage in this necessarily biased view of the city. Firmly ensconced in the upper class due to his royal birth, he has access to parts of the city undreamed of by normal citizens, which allows him to more fully insist upon his vision of Paris as two different cities vying against one another. According to social geographer David Harvey, this simplistic view of a city at war with itself dominated discourse about urban life for, "no matter how intricate the class structure and the division of social space in actuality, the simplistic image of Paris as a city divided into two classes and two spaces erupts again and again in representations of the time."[13] By focusing on this division, Rodolphe draws attention to the exceptional nature of his own position, which manages to straddle the rich and poor quarters with remarkable ease. His mastery of diverse urban codes and spaces strongly contrasts the powerlessness of women such as La Goualeuse and Rigolette, both of whom depend on his help in order to escape

[13] David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 297.

oppressive financial exploitation. Moreover, whereas characters like La Goualeuse are condemned for concealing past identities, Rodolphe dons his various disguises with complete impunity. Like the flâneur who strolls through the city while remaining somehow separate from it, Rodolphe is able to pass through – observing, opining, and even interfering – without getting caught in the urban mire that entraps so many other characters of the novel.

Although I read Rodolphe's seamless transition from pampered prince into criminal consort as a result of financial and physical clout, neither strength nor money could protect him in the *tapis-franc* if he were not properly costumed. Garbed in the standard "blouse bleue" that marked nineteenth-century Parisian workers, he turns a common outfit into a disguise, and a sign of urban poverty into one of urban privilege.[14] Since Rodolphe passes the bandits' physiognomic scrutiny so easily, one can argue that, when decoding the appearances of strangers, only costumes and disguises consistently produce predictable interpretations. Indeed, even a known disguise can provide apt cover, for according to Richard Sennett, "any appearance a person made was in some way real, because it was tangible; indeed, if that appearance were a mystery, all the more reason for taking it seriously" (21). Since costumes are often parodic versions of imitated fashions, and, as such, are rarely open to multiple interpretations, the disguised figure is usually

[14] For a more scathing indictment of Rodolphe's performance of poverty, see Karl Marx, *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Critique*, Trans. R. Dixon (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956) 84. Marx notes that Rodolphe is less intrigued by the contrasts he encounters in the course of his urban adventures and is, on the contrary, entirely fascinated with his own performances of the divergent metropolitan types.

only a caricature of what he attempts to represent.[15] So while the prince's clothing may seem to be identical to that worn by real Parisian workers, there is, as Sue notes, a discernable difference: "Rodolphe était toujours habillé en ouvrier, mais on remarquait dans ses vêtements une certaine recherche" (83). The very nature of performed identities, in other words, is such that the performance is always visible on the surface of the disguised body. The perfectly played part, in fact, is another sign of deception, and Sue warns against those whose impenetrable surfaces portend false identities:

> Les personnes fausses, froides, réfléchies, s'assimilent avec une promptitude merveilleuse le langage et les manières les plus opposés à leur caractère: chez elles tout est dehors, surface, apparence, vernis, écorce; dès qu'on les pénètre, dès qu'on les devine, elles sont perdues; aussi l'espèce d'instinct de conservation dont elles sont douées les rend éminemment propres au déguisement moral. Elles se griment et se costument avec la prestesse et l'habilité d'un comédien consommé. (241)

Although Sue explicitly condemns this sort of deception, Rodolphe proves to be the exception. As an unofficial, undercover virtue-detective, the prince can adopt and discard disguises at will and, as a wealthy man, he can investigate the hidden corners of a city that is virtually his to explore.

Propped by his twin pillars of privilege – class and gender – Rodolphe defines, rather than plays by, the rules of the urban game, which is perhaps why the costumed prince is tolerated, even celebrated, while the concealed prostitute is not. His ability to master of all the codes of dress, speech, and behavior gives him complete access to the city since, according to Daniel Roche, "Paris est la ville où l'on juge par les apparences

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[15] This preponderance of caricatures in Sue's work is one of the many attributes linking it to popular melodrama. While the villains in *Mystères de Paris* are masked, the readers are always let in on the secret of their hidden evil natures and are, therefore, encouraged to be suspicious of any character playing his or her part too well.

avant tout, où il est facile d'en imposer par ses manières parce que tout le monde est acteur et que personne n'est dupe des uns et des autres."[16] All disguises, however, even those worn without the intent to deceive, affect the overall legibility of the urban panorama, so the characters that hide behind them are soundly condemned when they are unmasked. Rodolphe, however, suffers no negative consequences when his identity is revealed at the end of the novel. Indeed, his fan club reveres him all the more when, through the generous interventions made possible by the prince of Gerolstein, families are reunited and their humble needs are satisfied. While his friends may view his worker's outfit as a rather harmless disguise, critics (beginning, of course, with Marx) have challenged this assumption, faulting the prince for adopting the role of a heavy-handed vigilante. Because he is more powerful than the police, Rodolphe invents and inflicts punishments that go far beyond what the law allows, and, since his identity is initially concealed from his enemies, they are entirely unprepared for his elaborate (one could say sadistic) reprimands. So while his friends deem his disguises harmless, even providential, Rodolphe's access to all parts of the city has deadly consequences for the criminals he deceives.

Rodolphe may evade detection while dressed as a lower-class worker, but he allows few disguised villains to elude his own apparently less fallible gaze. Indeed, one could argue that only such an able actor could detect falsity in others, thus ensuring that, once he leaves Paris, the city's mysteries will once again flourish. Costumes alone are not sufficient, however, for penetrating the urban throng of assumed identities and Rodolphe

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[16] Daniel Roche, *La culture des apparences: Une histoire du vêtement XVIIe-XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1989) 382.

must depend on his exceptionable judgment in order to evaluate just how authentically the characters surrounding him are played: "Rodolphe était très physionomiste, et sujet à des sympathies ou à des aversions presque toujours justifiées" (278). Influencing both how people are *seen* and how they *see*, gender and class fully determine the scope of the physiognomic gaze.[17] Throughout the novel, this gaze is largely one-way, for, as vigilant as certain criminals may be when seeking their next victim, they rarely cast their sights upon those significantly above them. This gaze, moreover, is not leveled with the goal of *knowing*, as would be the case in the *physiologies* or other urban tableaux, but rather with the purpose of *judging*. When, for example, La Goualeuse is sent to Saint-Lazare prison for appearing on the Champs Elysées as a registered prostitute, the aristocratic women who volunteer at the prison subject her to their critical, but cursory, stares, for "…ces femmes, sans cesse en contact avec les détenues, finissent, au bout de longues années, par acquérir une telle science de la physiognomie de ces malheureuses qu'elles les jugent presque toujours sûrement du premier coup d'oeil, et qu'elles les classent à l'instant selon leur degré d'immoralité" (608). Of course it goes without saying that the imprisoned women in the novel do not stare back, which speaks both to the nature of prison and to the class-based politics of looking.[18] While Sue's novel, then, complicates the notion of a one-to-one correspondence between self and appearance endorsed with the *physiologies*,

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[17] This gaze is the subject of numerous critical analyses of the text and particular attention is paid to the way in which Rodolphe punishes the novel's main villain, le Maître d'école, by having his private physician blind him. In a world governed by sight, this is the ultimate punishment and the villain is made helplessly vulnerable by it.

[18] According to Charles Bernheimer, women sent to jail for improper acts of solicitation were striped of all rights before all who judged them, stating that "the arrested woman had no recourse to a court of law. Indeed, she was for all intents and purposes already placed outside the law by the very fact of her accusation." Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997) 29.

it fails to address the more troubling aspects, such as this privileged (usually male) bourgeois gaze, upon which such texts are founded.[19]

Sue's novel is, in fact, predicated on such limitations of visibility as he clearly intends to introduce his readers to an invisible (and therefore unknown) segment of the metropolis. In her preface to the 2009 edition of the novel, Lyon-Caen argues that Sue's social impact can, in fact, be attributed to his ability to insert this ignored population into the larger public discourse, stating that "au-delà de l'indécision idéologique de Sue, la force indissociablement poétique et politique des *Mystères de Paris* réside dans leur capacité à instituer un débat ouvert au plus grand nombre, à faire circuler les idées réformatrices, à rendre visible tout un univers de misères, petites ou grandes, qui demeuraient exclues de l'espace public."[20] While some of the urban figures that Sue depicts – including seamstresses, maids, and even prostitutes – were never entirely absent from other mainstream urban depictions, Sue breaks ground by transforming these usually marginal figures in fully developed characters capable of inspiring sympathy amongst a readership otherwise disposed to ignore or overlook them. Although Sue may have intended to reveal an unknown world to a middle class ignorant of its city's underground criminals and destitute workers, he had an equally profound effect on the very workers he championed. Throughout the novel's serialized publication in *Le Journal*

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[19] The reader, too, is implicated in this voyeuristic gaze, as he (or she) is invited to participate in this objectification of lower class subject through the rhetorical alignment of author and audience. According to Prendergast, this notion of armchair (slum) tourism was taken a step further by Sue's novel as "one of the effects of *Les Mystères de Paris* on Sue's upper-class readership was to produce a fashion for dressing up as workers and criminals as the requisite disguises for a voyeuristic tour of Parisian slumland, thus transforming that world into an essentially picturesque object, not unlike the aristocratic outings to the lunatic asylum at Charenton" (25).

[20] Judith Lyon-Caen, Préface. *Les Mystères de Paris*. Eugène Sue (Paris: Gallimard, 2009) 16.

des débats, Sue was proclaimed a working-man's hero and friend to the poor on the strength of his sympathetic portrayal of the laboring class and the difficulties under which they worked.[21] Identifying the author with his princely protagonist, readers even petitioned Sue, asking for advice, aid, and intervention in a whole host of economic and personal problems.[22] Although workers most frequently identified with Sue's honest but luckless lapidary Morel, his treatment of working women – from La Goualeuse to Morel's equally unlucky daughter Louise – demonstrates his desire to paint a complete portrait of Paris's invisible citizens and to better catalogue the dangers of this metropolitan space.

Women play a unique role in Sue's Paris as they reveal the extent to which social status is a fragile, ever-vulnerable state. Moving up and (far more frequently) down the economic ladder, women bear the brunt of the city's role in destabilizing any identity based on class. In a novel full of shifting appearances, however, La Goualeuse is particularly remarkable, not for her numerous costume changes, but, rather, for her inability or unwillingness to become the part she is dressed to play. While other characters can slip in and out of outfits and storylines, La Goualeuse is trapped within both the body and narrative of the redeemed prostitute. As many critics, such as Peter Brooks and Hollis Clayson, have pointed out, the prostitute's body is always and already

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[21] See Judith Lyon-Caen, *La Lecture et la vie: Les usages du roman au temps de Balzac* (Paris: Tallandier, 2006) 256-62, for a more complete discussion of the political engagement of the novel. In spite of Sue's obvious concern with working class conditions, however, critics such as Harvey believe that all such representations (howsoever sympathetic) exaggerated the "otherness" of the poor, thereby solidifying the ghettoization of these neighborhoods and types (280).

[22] See Lyon-Caen, *La Lecture et la vie* (118-19) for a more complete discussion of readers' epistolary communication with Sue and their tendency to view him as a spokesperson of the working-poor.

a story – of either poverty or greed – complete with a predictable outcome.[23] The two possible plots open to the prostitute in nineteenth-century literature – unrepentant misery or redemption, both of which typically result in death – seemingly foreclose other narrative options. Although a sign of disorder when soliciting on the streets, the prostitute in literature is controlled by plot, for, according to Bernheimer, "the destabilizing force of the prostitute's erotic body can be safely evoked, if only in disguised or displaced manner, because the narration is structured to contain and discipline her unruly energy" (52). Sue, it would seem, both struggles with and conforms to these prescribed plot lines – first by casting La Goualeuse as a failed seamstress unable to support herself legitimately and then by allowing her to try on and discard two equally stereotypical roles, that of the peasant and the princess – only to expose her to recognition and subsequent recasting as a prostitute. While further attention will be given to La Goualeuse's attempts and refusals to reinvent herself, I wish to linger briefly over this collapse between body and narrative in order to better capture the ways in which gender and class define the limits of corporeal expressiveness in Sue's novel.

While a prostitute's body was typically read as an open declaration of narrative predictability, the legibility of bodies in general, and women's bodies in particular, required a trained eye. The cheaply printed, widely disseminated French *physiologies* almost served as how-to manuals, demonstrating how physical features and elements of dress can be translated into indications of character, social standing, and (in the case of

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[23] Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1993) 70; and Hollis Clayson, *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2003) 2.

women) sexual availability. While the physiological sketch necessarily skims only the surface of the body, narrative literature, as Brooks points out, turns the body into a story that must be deciphered over time in order to reveal its significance:

> the body is made a signifier, or the place on which messages are written. This is perhaps most of all true in narrative literature, where the body's story, through the trials of desire and over time, often is very much part of the story of a character. The result is what we might call a narrative aesthetics of embodiment, where meaning and truth are made carnal. (21)

Treated almost as yet another architectural feature of the modern city that loses meaning if deprived of its background, the working woman's body was, typically, not submitted to trials, nor did it change over time, and, as such, was rarely a narrative main event. Suspended ambiguously between the respectability of bourgeois wives and the venality of registered or clandestine prostitutes, seamstresses, milliners, and shop girls were read as a type with whom a middle class audience could sympathize and simultaneously eroticize. Depicted more frequently as a stock character than a fully developed protagonist in early nineteenth-century literature, the working woman became a symbol of the modern urban experience enjoyed by men.[24] While their bodies signified a destructive aspect of the city's modern anonymity – which transformed individuals into types – these women, like the prostitutes discussed above, could only rarely generate new meanings outside the predictable descriptions of them found in panoramic literature.

Relying on his readers' familiarity with well-known stereotypes associated with this ubiquitous urban figure, Sue reveals that, behind the caps, cheap shawls, and other

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[24] See Catherine Nesci, *Le Flâneur et les flâneuses: Les femmes et la ville à l'époque romantique* (Grenoble: ELLUG, 2007) 393. Nesci , in particular, points out the paradoxical role women played as they were both marginalized as urban players and central to representations about city life.

recognizable paraphernalia of working girls, exploited bodies were being misread as tantalizingly available ones. Recasting the famous sexual libertinage of these *femmes isolées*, or unchaperoned women, Sue challenges the assumptions associated with working girls through a categorical denial of poverty's power to corrupt those committed to an upright life.[25] Well aware of the difficulty, if not impossibility, of earning a living through sewing, social commentators of the nineteenth-century long viewed self-supporting women as a particular social problem since, as historian Joan Wallach Scott argues, "the interchangeable usages of *femmes isolées* suggested that all such working women were potential prostitutes, inhabiting a marginal and unregulated world in which good order – social, economic, moral, political – was subverted."[26] Sue, however, counters this collapse between poor women and prostitutes as he demonstrates how, by embracing bourgeois values of thrift, self-denial, and hard work, some working women manage to avoid insolvency and, consequently, recourse to prostitution. Contrasting the potential fortitude of the working woman with her dire economic vulnerability, Sue illustrates the extent to which home life (with family life as the ideal) preserves women against the temptations of city streets. The similar backgrounds but different outcomes of La Goualeuse and Rigolette, for example, underline the importance of securing a steady domicile when faced with the pleasures and pains of metropolitan life. Orphaned and imprisoned as children for vagrancy, the two women both seek to support themselves through sewing upon their release from prison, but only Rigolette thinks to first establish

[25] Sue goes rather too far in his insistence on the sexual virtue of some of his working class heroines, as I will discuss further below.
[26] Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988) 143.

a proper home which can inspire the confidence of prospective employers. La Goualeuse, however, lives for daytrips into the countryside surrounding Paris and, without a permanent address or steady lifestyle, fails to gain the trust necessary to establish professional connections.

Although Sue refuses to view La Goualeuse's descent into prostitution as the inevitable fate of the self-supporting woman in the big city, other commentators had a bleaker perspective on the economic hardships associated with sewing for a living. Statesman Jules Simon, for example, believed that, for the vast majority of seamstresses working on a for-hire basis out of their homes, utter ruin was prevented only by finding alternate (typically illicit) means of earning an income, for "si elle compte uniquement sur son aiguille, ou elle mourra de faim, ou elle descendra dans la rue, suivant une expression consacrée et qui fait frémir" (181). Sue, while sympathetic to the trials suffered by La Goualeuse, depicts her as an Aesopian grasshopper, incapable of planning for harder times ahead. Indeed, she is undone by her own honest helplessness – which starkly opposes Rigolette's ant-like resourcefulness – and is why, instead of securing a proper place for herself in the city, she falls victim to such urban institutions as prison and prostitution:

> Je savais très bien coudre; j'avais bon courage, je n'étais pas embarrassée; j'entre dans une boutique de lingère de la rue Saint-Martin. Pour ne tromper personne, je dis que je sors de prison depuis deux mois, et que j'ai bonne envie de travailler: on me montre la porte. Je demande de l'ouvrage à emporter; on me dit que je moque du monde en demandant qu'on me confie seulement une chemise. Comme je m'en retournais bien triste…j'ai rencontré l'ogresse et une des vieilles qui étaient toujours après moi depuis ma sortie de prison…Je ne savais plus comment vivre…Elles m'ont emmenée…elles m'ont fait boire de l'eau-de-vie!... Et violà… (57)

Not surprisingly, employers refuse to take La Goualeuse at face value since she entirely fails to project a stable sense of self. Her obvious passivity vis-à-vis her initiation into the world of prostitution, moreover, indicates that it is something that she just lets happen to her, rather than being the life that she would have chosen for herself.[27] Given La Goualeuse's love for pleasure and lack of discipline, it is she (rather than Rigolette) who more faithfully corresponds to the conventional image of the Parisian grisette depicted within popular literature. By insisting on the improbable nature of such a lifestyle, however, Sue modifies the grisette-figure, making her conform more to middle class values and thereby allowing her to avoid the fate that commentators such as Simon foresee for those of her type.

Working Women and the City

While La Goualeuse is remarkable for illustrating a failed feminine urban type, Sue adamantly refuses to castigate all working women. Rigolette may serve as the most striking example of the working girl made good, but Sue renders her (and not, somewhat shockingly, La Goualeuse) the rule rather than the exception. Indeed, the novel includes a vast assortment of humble female types – the *portière*, grisette, *fille des rues*, and servant – all of whom stand in stark opposition to La Goualeuse by showing that, even in the cutthroat urban environment, the morally upright can be recognized and rewarded, while

[27] See Scott, 109, for a discussion of the extent to which such a fate had become a cliché when discussing the economic conditions of seamstresses. Sue, I maintain, rewrites this cliché by insisting upon the extent to which La Goualeuse's economic frivolity left her in such a position. While this recasting of the seamstress-as-prostitute may initially be read as a denial of harsh economic realities, I argue that Sue implicates La Goualeuse in her own demise only to illustrate the fact that it was not, in fact, her fate to succumb to such a distasteful form of ruminative labor.

the fallen can be redeemed. As emblematic urban figures, these characters served as shorthand for qualities that a bourgeois audience could take for granted – such as the sexual openness of the grisette and the vulgar obtrusiveness of the *portière* – but Sue complicates these depictions by allowing these women to evolve beyond simple types. The changes that befall these women, however, are not entirely unproblematic as progress in the novel occurs as a somewhat controversial result of Rodolphe's personal civilizing mission. By privileging certain values or lifestyles over others – such as marriage over cohabitation or, even more questionably, over employment – Rodolphe inevitably equates redemption with *bourgeoisification* as he helps these women make over their lives. Indeed, these changes are nearly impossible to imagine without his intervention since all the working women he assists require the economic stability he provides in order to leave behind the professions that render them so vulnerable in the first place.

La Portière

While Sue – along with many other writers of urban literature – seems primarily interested in how labor effects the young, unmarried, and female segment of the urban population, he also documents the important role played by the older and infinitely more matronly *portière* in the home-life of his metropolitan subjects. As quintessential landmarks of the Parisian cityscape, the *portiers* on rue de Temple authenticate Rodolphe's venture into the world of the urban apartment house. With its hierarchical arrangement of living space (marked by a drop in the incomes and socio-economic status

of its tenants as one ascends each level of the building) the house can be read as a microcosm of the city in all its mysteriousness and the *portière* is the point of entry.[28] Renting a room in the guise of a worker, Rodolphe exploits Anastasie Pipelet's stereotypical chattiness in order to gain information about the tenants and, while her stereotypical and garrulous indiscretions are described as repulsive, his equally indiscrete snooping is not. In every way the typical portrait of a *portière*, Anastasie is initially bawdy and humorous, only to be ultimately humanized when Rodolphe finally detects the compassionate person behind the ridiculous rendition of a common type: "depuis que Mme Pipelet avait fait montre d'un sentiment de charité à l'égard des malheureux des mansardes, elle semblait moins repoussante à Rodolphe" (230). Knowing the poor as neighbors (rather than statistics or charity-cases), Anastasie is uniquely positioned to inquire into the realities of their lives as to better render necessary aid. So while the *portière*'s inquisitive, all-seeing eye is typically deemed vicious in the *physiologies*, it is here rendered compassionate since Anastasie's sympathies are aligned with those of Rodolphe.

When, at the end of the novel, the good are rewarded and the evil are killed (usually by their own wickedness), Anastasie's rather ineffectual husband Alfred is made a guard at the bank Rodolphe establishes to supply short-term loans for the poor. The reward, however, is of an ambiguously advantageous nature since the transition from

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[28] See Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999) 42. Part of the emphasis on the *portière*'s notorious vulgarity was, in fact, a technique used to draw distinctions between her and the bourgeois tenants she served, according to Marcus. Indeed, Rodolphe's snoopiness is absorbed by this convenient lower class character and he can "stoop" to her level without risk of being confounded with her type.

portier to guard is in all respects a lateral move that does not entail an obvious social ascension. Whatever the financial gain involved with the change in position, however, Alfred's job *does* elevate the Pipelets above their working class peers since the workers with whom they would come into contact in such a place would be supplicants, seeking economic aid. As *portiers* on rue de Temple, Alfred and Anastasie were regularly looked down upon by bourgeois tenants, but in their new position, no one – with the exception of the bank manager Germain and his new wife Rigolette – is above them on the social ladder. From this new social pinnacle, Anastasie becomes a reformed *portière* and her gossip is reduced to proclamations of Rodolphe's goodness since, as Rigolette informs the prince, "il y a une fameuse trompette pour répéter à tout bout de champ que c'est vous qu'on doit bénir; cette trompette est Mme Pipelet, qui répète à chacun qu'il n'y a que son roi des locataires…qui puisse avoir fait cette oeuvre charitable et son vieux chéri Alfred est toujours de son avis" (1278). Alfred's opinion now matters since his promotion elevates him above his wife (the more dominant of the two) by eliminating the figure of the *portière* (in all her vulgar glory) altogether. Elevated above their working-class peers and, indeed, their former selves, the Pipelets achieve a degree of solid respectability typically unavailable to the mere *portiers* of an apartment building, although this newfound propriety comes at the cost of Anastasie's (and, as will be shown, any woman's) identity as a worker.

La Grisette

While, for Anastasie, respectability is entirely incompatible with employment, Rodolphe's project of working-class *bourgeosification* initially entails, in the case of Rigolette, a slight bending of the rules by which all Parisian grisettes were known to live. Indeed, his interest in her is two-fold, and reveals the extent to which Sue tries to have it both ways when it comes to Rigolette: initially a sexually appealing character, the grisette becomes all the more interesting to the prince when he realizes that she is sexually unavailable. Replacing the requisite student lover with the respectable bourgeois husband, Sue actually corrupts Rigolette since, by not offering herself to someone she knows will never marry her, she cannot prove the disinterestedness for which grisettes were famous. Indeed, according to Karl Marx this relationship is what makes a grisette such an appealing urban type, for "it is precisely in that attachment that she constitutes a really human contrast to the hypocritical, narrow-hearted, self-seeking wife of the bourgeois, to the whole circle of the bourgeoisie, that is, to the official circle" (102). Marx's celebration of the grisette reduces her to a selfless, sexual offering, but his understanding of her type relies on her not identifying with bourgeois principles. While Rigolette is indifferent to appearances, to the extent that her easy friendships with male lodgers cause Anastasie to gossip about her, behind closed doors she is as chaste as any middle class daughter. Rigolette's "grisetteness," then, is all form and no substance, as she looks but cannot wholly act the part. If, as I have already shown, Sue must make Rigolette financially prudent in order to allow her to survive as a grisette, he also tempers her stereotypical sexual extravagance in order to better establish his modified-grisette as a truly viable type and a model for all self-supporting women.

What makes Rigolette even more an object of bourgeois fantasy, however, is her cheerful acceptance of her exploitative work conditions. With characteristic naivety, she describes her budget in itemized detail to Rodolphe and reveals that she subsists on water and bread throughout her twelve-hour workdays. The prince of Gerolstein is moved not by the inadequacy of her wage or the excessiveness of her labor but, rather, by her optimism and fearlessness in the face of financial vulnerability. Working on a for-hire basis out of her home, Rigolette has no safety net to protect her against unexpected illness or loss of employment. Such tenuous work conditions were repeated in garrets throughout the city, according to historian Judith Coffin, as "the life stories of sweated workers recounted a distinctly urban, and Parisian, drama."[29] In spite of Rigolette's temporary success as a self-supporting grisette, Rodolphe recognizes that this lifestyle is not sustainable and he encourages a marriage that would eliminate the need for Rigolette to work altogether. When a generous dowry (provided by Rodolphe) and well-employed husband catapult Rigolette into the ranks of the bourgeoisie at the end of the novel, she cannot, however, completely renounce her working-class identity. She insists, rather, on retaining the grisette's cap that metonymically aligns her with the bohemian crowd she leaves behind. This bit of coquetry is perfectly in keeping with Sue's conception of the ideal grisette as she is, at once, physically distinguishable from her bourgeois counterparts while unexpectedly complaisant with their morals and behavior. Her marriage, moreover, distances her from the city (where, presumably, her cap could cause

[29] Judith Coffin, *The Politics of Women's Work: The Parisian Garment Trades 1750-1915* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996) 236.

minor problems of legibility) that insists on defining her as a frivolous, flirtatious, and sexually vulnerable type.

Workers to Wives: *La fille des rues* and *la bonne*

By making the Pipelets and Rigolette pillars of their working class neighborhood, where they can inspire others to emulate their good conduct, Rodolphe sets a standard for an idealized working class subject. While Anastasie and Rigolette seem to have *earned* their places in the ranks of the bourgeoisie, however, women less useful than the conspiratorial *portière* and less sexually pure than the virginal grisette are also given second chances and new lives by managing (with Rodolphe's help, of course) to transcend the preordained destiny usually reserved for fallen women. La Louve, a prostitute and self-proclaimed *fille des rues*, and Louise Morel, a working-class servant who is raped and then accused of infanticide by her employer, can be seen as analogues to the more complex La Goualeuse, as they are all women who, though fallen, are raised out of their degraded positions to be envisioned as something more. While much has been written about the figure of the fallen woman in nineteenth-century literature, there is little attention given (most likely for lack of literary examples) to fallen women who are rehabilitated and reincorporated into the family through their roles as wife and mother. La Louve and Louise are remarkable, then, not only for their capacity to reinvent themselves in these new roles, but, rather, for their ability to do so without pretense or disguise. Unlike La Goualeuse, who is forced to hide her past from all but her immediate benefactors both at Bouqueval and in Gerolstein, La Louve and Louise do not have to

dissimulate in order to become more than degraded bodies. The fates of these two women show Sue at his best, as he does not condemn them to the life of shame and repentance endured by La Goualeuse in spite of her far more brilliant social status.

La Goualeuse first meets La Louve while imprisoned at Saint-Lazare and initiates their friendship by encouraging the ferocious woman to imagine a life beyond prostitution and prison. La Louve resists such daydreaming since she sees no possibility for change, stating "à quoi bon regretter d'être une fille des rues, puisque je dois mourir fille des rues?" (643). Ignorant of the miraculous Rodolphe, La Louve is of course justified for her pessimistic outlook since both she and her lover, a known poacher, have already been written off as vicious societal outcasts. Indeed, criminality and subsequent social ostracism can be viewed as family legacies, since La Louve's early induction into a life of debauchery is firmly established when her own stepmother takes her to the police station to be registered as a prostitute, and her lover, Martial, comes from a long line of condemned outlaws. Although Sue occasionally endorses the idea of an inherited criminal biological makeup, he consistently laments the pernicious influence of dangerous elements on impressionable youth. As a *fille des rues* – both literally (without a fixed domicile) and figuratively (as a prostitute) – La Louve is even less capable than La Goualeuse of earning the confidence and trust of others and, without any training or skills, is even less likely to earn a respectable income. Moreover, unlike her prison mate who at least has her angelic beauty to recommend her to others, La Louve looks every bit as bestial as her name (She-Wolf) implies. If Rodolphe's goal is to encourage and sponsor the civilization of the natives encountered in the Parisian underworld, La Louve

is arguably his most challenging case. In every sense the portrait of the degenerate and disruptive woman (who, although invisible in urban literature, was rather known for causing disorder on public thoroughfares), she seems both unmarriageable and unemployable and, therefore, beyond the reach of any aid.

Upon her release from prison, however, La Louve is quickly given the chance to prove her worth when she saves the lives of both her prison-mate and her lover, thereby casting her fierce and courageous nature in a new light. Although already committed to living honestly with her companion, La Louve is rewarded for saving La Goualeuse (after it is discovered that she is Rodolphe's long lost daughter) with a homestead in Algeria. While critics have cogently pointed out that this reward is a form of exile, inflicted upon the lower-class characters who knew the newly-fabricated princess Amélie in her more degraded status as a prostitute, this displacement can also be seen as an attempt to harness the violent natures of La Louve and her husband by putting them to a more legitimate use.[30] Since the city is an endless source of temptation, removing them from the metropolis is a way to safeguard their newfound respectability. While Sue undoubtedly domesticates these characters by enlisting them into the service of the bourgeoisie, he also allows La Louve to cast aside shame or regret in order to realize her rather tame version of happiness. The former prostitute becomes a model colonialist and citizen without ever apologizing for her past or denying her true proclivities (as both she and her husband relish taking up arms and quelling Algerian uprisings). La Goualeuse, on the other hand, could never emulate La Louve's transformation since the shift from prostitute

[30] See Bernheimer, 51.

to princess is too great a leap, an idea argued by Peter Brooks who states that "the reason La Louve can survive rehabilitation, while Fleur-de-Marie ultimately cannot, must be attributed to social class: a prostitute can be reclaimed for the proletariat, become an honest working-class wife, but not for the bourgeoisie."[31] While Brooks downplays the significance of La Louve's redemption and reinvention, he is of course correct to note that a former prostitute can thrive in the wilds of North Africa (or the working class quarters of Paris) in a way that would be impossible in more staid, respectable, or royal localities.

However significant the transformation from prostitute to wife, La Louve's greatest accomplishment is learning to value virtue over vice, a change inspired by La Goualeuse's influence rather than Rodolphe's economic aid. For Louise Morel, however, sexual impurity is a result of violence, not venality, and therefore cannot be redeemed by a mere change of heart. As the eldest daughter of a poor artisan, she is sent to work as a servant, only to be drugged and raped by her employer, the hypocritical notary Jacques Ferrand. When she becomes pregnant, Ferrand denies his involvement and, after the birth of a stillborn baby, he accuses her of murder.[32] Even after Rodolphe's intervention, Ferrand's punishment, and her own acquittal and financial compensation, Louise believes that she is forever fixed in the role of a fallen woman since, as she asks Rigolette, "quel est l'honnête homme qui voudra de moi, quoique j'aie de l'argent?" (1199). Her

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[31] Peter Brooks, "The Mark of the Beast: Prostitution, Melodrama, and Narrative," *New York Literary Forum* 7 (1980): 134.

[32] Women's legal recourse against men who seduced (or raped), impregnated, and abandoned them was nonexistent until the end of the century in spite of the fact that nearly a third of all Parisian births were considered illegitimate during the July Monarchy. See Claire Goldberg Moses, *French Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: SUNY Press, 1985) 28.

insecurities echo those expressed earlier by the parish priest at Bouqueval, who asks the same question about the possibility of La Goualeuse ever finding happiness in marriage in spite of the generous dowry she can expect from Rodolphe. This constant refrain of condemnation marks the rigid boundary between permanently tainted bodies and those that can evolve over time to adapt to a person's changing circumstances. It is of course noteworthy that neither Louise nor La Goualeuse is actually rejected by any potential suitor; having internalized bourgeois views of virginity and purity, they (and their so-called friends) police themselves, declaring their own bodies unbefitting and therefore off-limits. While their bodies are not legibly marked as impure, only Louise continues to live in the city where her past is known, leaving La Goualeuse alone in worrying about the consequences of being misread as suitable spouse.

Unlike La Louve, who can ameliorate her situation through a newfound adherence to bourgeois family values, Louise is crushed by her devotion to these very values that make her write herself off as soiled goods. Indeed, her entire family falls victim to their own moral scruples and to their impossible desire to live by the middle-class tenants of hard work and honesty in the midst of their deplorable poverty. Louise and her father are the very emblems of the downtrodden, but deserving, working class and resonated with Sue's readers as such.[33] Both characters accept exploitation in the name of duty, as she stays with her villainous employer in order to be able to support her starving family through her wages, while he is kept alive only so that he may continue to work. Interestingly, while both domestic servants and poor artisans were legion in Paris during

[33] According to Louis Chevalier, the novel took it decidedly socialist turn after receiving an enthusiastic response from readers following the chapter introducing Morel. Quoted in Prendergast, 14.

the early half of the nineteenth-century, neither was ever fictionalized into an urban type. Domestic servants, in particular, were invisible in most urban panoramic literature. This silence can likely be attributed to the fact that, because they were attached to middle- or upper class households, they were not a visible aspect of street life nor could they be turned into objects of overt bourgeois sexual interest.[34] As a poor servant in a powerful notary's household, Louise's story of rape and abuse was undoubtedly a prevalent – though unspeakable – occurrence in the urban metropolis. Louise is exceptional, however, only because she falls upon a sympathetic ally (Rodolphe) – who rescues her from prison and from the necessity of making herself vulnerable through further employment – and, eventually, a husband who recognizes that "elle a été bien malheureuse, mais non coupable" (1277). Escaping the stigma reserved for fallen women through a respectable marriage, Louise, like La Louve, accomplishes her transformation without masking her past or deceiving those who take her at face value.

These profiles of working women may vary insofar as each woman's temperament, luck, and degree of vulnerability differ, but, together, they illustrate the extent to which Sue depicts a Paris that is inherently unsafe for female workers. By transforming working women into wives, Sue prefigures later paternalistic and non-radical solutions to urban misery, best expressed by Simon who argues that "c'est bien notre faute si nous cherchons au loin, sans parvenir à les trouver, des remèdes contre nos misères sociales; il n'y a qu'un seul remède, et nous l'avons sous la main, sans tant de

[34] Ladies' maids, who had a somewhat more elevated status within the bourgeois household, were a notable exception. Famously ambiguous, they were often depicted as well-dressed working class women who often aspired to replace their mistresses as the lady of the house.

métaphysique, si nous savons nous en servir: c'est le retour à la vie de famille" (265). Replacing workers with wives, Sue reduces his working-class subjects to mere copies of their bourgeois counterparts. Viewing such tidy happy-endings as a limit to Sue's socialism, Prendergast argues that societal change is only ever superficial in the novel:

> Despite the attempt to infuse the theme of 'crime' with a new social seriousness by articulating it in terms of the theme of urban poverty, despite the accompanying rhetoric of protest and reform, it is now generally held that the underlying conception of working-class life and social change in *Les Mystères de Paris* is ultimately committed to a vision of no change, at least at any fundamental level of social organization. (22)

It is true that Sue posits incredibly limited options for the amelioration of the working class as a whole, but his treatment of individuals reveals a surprising lack of prejudice against workers. While other prominent social commentators often blamed the workers for the deplorable conditions in which they lived (citing debauchery, drunkenness, and an inordinate love of finery), Sue goes to lengths to show that even the fallen deserve both a chance to start a new life and the economic support to do so. Giving both La Louve and Louise the option of marriage is not only in keeping with Sue's bourgeois tendencies, but it also allows him to carve out a safe (if unimaginative) niche for women in the proletarian city. La Goualeuse, on the other hand, presents a different problem since redemption for her means incorporation within the middle or upper class, and the very notion of bourgeois female sexuality admits no hint of deviance. She stands, then, in opposition to these other women since she is not to be saved as a worker who has overcome her past but rather as a prince's daughter who has to repress and reinvent it.

A Failed Working Type

For La Goualeuse, both sin and redemption are stages in a life largely orchestrated by others. With new roles constantly thrust upon her, she finds herself torn between who she wants to become and who she was. Upon her removal from Paris, for example, she is doubled as both self (the repentant prostitute) and other (virginal peasant), being forced to perform the latter while never ceasing to forget or regret the degradation of the former. While the contradictions that define her grow more exaggerated as she ascends the social ladder, La Goualeuse is a split character from the beginning of the novel – divided between a virginal appearance and a venal body. The first time she is described, in fact, when still just a prostitute soliciting in doorways in the slums at the center of Paris, she is complicated by the conflicting messages expressed by a face that does not correspond with her surroundings or situation: "par une anomalie étrange, les traits de la Goualeuse offrent un de ces types angéliques et candides qui conservent leur idéalité même au milieu de la depravation, comme si la créature était impuissante à effacer par ses vices la noble empreinte que Dieu a mise au front de quelques êtres privilégiés" (40). Through the signifying body of La Goualeuse, Sue clearly invents a new type – the virginal prostitute – to complete his lowlife urban panorama.[35] Even her other nickname, Fleur-de-Marie, which in slum-slang means "virgin," completes the contradictory way in which she is viewed since this moniker is not meant to be ironic although her livelihood is openly known among the criminals with whom she lives. In spite of all the obvious implications

[35] When discussing the romanticized and cliché literary depictions of prostitutes with a heart of gold, Bernheimer focuses on the notion of repentance and how it worked the transformation of turning sinners into modern saints. La Goualeuse is unlike most other nineteenth-century depictions of reformed prostitutes because she is never really identified with her prostituted body. Indeed, although she enters the novel as prostitute, readers only ever see her fight off the men — Le Chourineur and Le Maître de l'école — who attempt to approach her, making her life as a prostitute something unbelievable, though crucial to the narrative.

of her profession, however, La Goualeuse remains paradoxically untouched. Although as a prostitute, her body is forever and irrevocably contaminated by contact with others, she remains figuratively unmarked and unaffected by her sordid conditions.[36]

Although the prostitute's body was an easily recognizable and well-documented feature of the nineteenth-century city, La Goualeuse's is remarkably invisible throughout the novel. Most often described as a disembodied face, she submits first to the defilement of her body, then to its systematic silencing. Since lower-class women in literature were most often depicted as carnal, embodied presences, this silence regarding La Goualeuse's body can be read as both an ultraconservative denial of the working woman's sexuality as well as a refusal to objectify the working-class physique. What is clear, however, is that La Goualeuse's inability to talk about the violence committed against her body only renders it more secretive. When, for example, at the end of the novel, she refuses to marry the cousin she loves, she rationalizes her choice by arguing that something once given to criminals could never be offered to a husband, citing her contaminated body only elliptically: "j'estime trop le prince Henri pour jamais lui donner une main qui a été touchée par les bandits de la Cité" (1292). As a substitute for her absent body, her hand is both a reminder of this body's sexual impurity and a sign of its displacement. Even the silenced body speaks, however, since, according to Brooks, "the body cannot be left in a nonsignifying somatic realm. It must mean. But it will do so only when made part of a web of signifying practices" (53). La Goualeuse's body is rather exceptional, however, in

[36] Marx notes that, before coming into contact with priests and other moralists, La Goualeuse was able to separate her bodily actions from her deeper sense of self and could thus continue to view herself in a positive light since it was only the act — and not the person — who was wrong (226).

that, the more she tries to invent a new identity on the surface of it, the less easily she can repress its storied past.

As she evolves from prostitute, to peasant, to princess, La Goualeuse acquires a new name and a new outfit to mark each persona. Standing in for the absent body, clothing marks her transformations in ways, however, that are beyond her control. Conflating the ownership of her clothes with authority over her body, she explains her relationship with the *ogresse*, or proprietor of the *tapis-franc*, as a perverse transaction wherein her body is traded for the apparel it wears: "les habits que je porte appartiennent à l'ogresse; …je ne puis bouger d'ici…elle me ferait arrêter comme voleuse…Je lui appartiens…il faut que je m'acquitte" (59). Using her body to pay for the clothes off her back, La Goualeuse becomes a literal slave to fashion. Explaining the economic arrangement between her and the *ogresse* in terms of clothing, rather than prostitution, La Goualeuse participates in the erasure of her body while simultaneously emphasizing its status as a commodity. In debt for the very outfit that brands her as a prostitute, La Goualeuse is held prisoner within the tavern until Rodolphe buys her gaudy rags and ownership of the girl is transferred. At Bouqueval, La Goualeuse escapes the *ogresse* and immediately sheds her garish clothing in order to be redressed – and reinvented – by Madame Georges, the caretaker of the farm. Since she is to live at Bouqueval by falsely passing herself off as Madame George's niece, this exchange of one set of suggestive clothing for another is crucial if she is not to be recognized as a prostitute by the farm's other residents. While the gaudiness of her first ensemble makes her identifiable as a prostitute, the second one publicizes her virginal appearance:

> Un joli bonnet rond à la paysanne et deux épais bandeaux de cheveux blonds encadraient la figure virginale de la jeune fille. Un ample fichu de mousseline blanche se croisait sur son sein et disparaissait à demi sous la haute bavette carrée d'un petit tablier de taffetas changeant, dont les reflets bleus et roses miroitaient sur le fond sombre d'une robe carmélite qui semble avoir été faite pour Marie. (115)

Transformed by such modest, nun-like attire, La Goualeuse loses all outward signs of her degradation at the moment she is taught to feel ashamed of her body and its unchaste past. In spite of her radical make-over, she continues to wear a reminder of this past (and her escape from it) upon her body in the form of a cross necklace engraved with the date of her arrival at the farm, or what Rodolphe calls her "redemption." Defined in turn by the *ogresses*' rags, Madame Georges' dress, and Rodolphe's cross, La Goualeuse is reduced to the role of a dressed doll in the hands of others who, ultimately, control the legibility of her body.

While La Goualeuse's ever-changing look and corresponding social personae are largely beyond her control, they inspire important questions about the very possibility of legible bodies in any – urban or otherwise – setting. If, as the authors of panoramic literature maintain, appearances constitute readable surfaces, one can only wonder how meaning can be derived from such malleable material. The city – where faces, attire, and physiques are all judged according to one's knowledge of physiognomic codes – is particularly plagued by inevitable misreadings, but this does not hinder the effort to understand since, according to Nesci, "la ville est un champ de 'sémiotisation' où toute matérialité visible renvoie à un invisible moral ou social, à une autre matérialité spatiale ou temporelle, à un ordre du sens plus ou moins caché, à une mémoire profane ou spirituelle déposée dans les choses" (54). While disguise and deception constitute

inevitable barriers to urban legibility, women, such as La Goualeuse, pay the price for misleading appearances in ways unknown to men like Rodolphe or even the far more nefarious Jacques Ferrand. Looking at how deceptions impel plot in the novel, critic Sara James maintains that "disguise illustrates understanding the codes of the city and is used as a means to empowerment," and, while for men this is largely true, few women are empowered by misrepresenting themselves (and certainly no working women are).[37] While the men Rodolphe elects to punish are privately exposed, women are turned into examples and unmasked publically, leaving no doubt about the different stakes faced by men and women when manipulating the legibility of their bodies.

In spite of her near-constant shifting between urban and rural locales throughout the novel, La Goualeuse's audience is always urban and it holds her to the urban codes of legibility. Although La Goualeuse attempts to leave her past behind in Paris, for example, it is not long before she is recognized and exposed in the relative isolation of her rural retreat. While visiting a friend at a neighboring farm, she comes into contact with a widowed milkmaid who recognizes her as both a prostitute and acquaintance of her husband's murderer, and denounces her before a throng of furious peasants. The girl's past associations do not, however, infuriate the peasants nearly as much as her present situation as a respected member of their rural society. Condemning her for her dissimulation, they mock her attempt to adopt the garments of an honest peasant: "Et ça ose s'habiller comme nous autres honnêtes filles de campagne, ajouta une des plus laides

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[37] Sara James, "Eugène Sue, G.W.M. Reynolds, and the Representation of the City as 'Mystery,'" *Babylon or New Jerusalem: Perceptions of the City in Literature*, Ed. Valeria Tinkler-Villani (New York: Rodopi, 2005) 257.

maritornes de la ferme" (374). Jealous of La Goualeuse's social advancement and ability to rise not only above her former station but above the "honest" peasantry as well, her accusers refuse to take her at face value and insist on treating her like the prostitute she has ceased to be. With this humiliating unmasking, it becomes clear that something as deeply private as the body has been made social, sharable, and subject to the judgment of others. Indeed, this experience marks a dissolution of self that originates with the *ogresse* and continues under Rodolphe and Madame Georges' tutelage; subjecting her to both exposure and then physical punishment, the angry peasants claim control over the signifying power of her body, as they deny the validity of its new incarnation as their social superior.

Recognition is, in many ways, a relief for La Goualeuse, as she is painfully aware that all marks of respect are aimed at the person she pretends to be, rather than who she really is. After her exposure at the Arnouville farm, she realizes that her post-prostitution options are limited to lies and dissimulation on one hand or complete social ostracism on the other. Through a brutal abduction and abandonment in Paris, however, she discovers the one place where she can be both known and respected. At Saint-Lazare prison, she is accepted as a reformed prostitute and plays an influential role amongst her fellow prisoners, as opposed to the more passive, effaced position she takes before her socially superior benefactors. La Goauleuse stands out amongst the other girls, according to the prison supervisor, because she fails to conform to the type of a hardened sex worker: "Je n'ai jamais vu de traits plus réguliers, plus candides…une figure de vierge. Ce qui donnait encore à sa physionomie une expression plus modeste, c'est qu'en arrivant ici

elle était vêtue comme une paysanne des environs de Paris" (608). Unlike the peasants at Arnouville, the prison staff and inmates respect La Goualeuse's attempt to adorn and reinvent her venal body, and their treatment of her reflects the persona she projects rather than the body she hides. Recognizing La Goualeuse as both a peer and a role model, the other prisoners are influenced by her conduct and she is credited with their transformation from cruel to compassionate. Although she is never happy in prison, this episode represents a brief period of authenticity for her during which she learns that in order to do the most good, she must own all aspects of herself and her experience.

This brief, but successful, period in La Goualeuse's short and storied life forces one to question how her fate would have differed had she been able to live as a reformed prostitute. A career as a reformer entails, of course, recognition of a pre-reform state, and former prostitutes who live open (but repentant) lives are largely absent from literature.[38] Since their bodies are their stories, once these bodies are taken out of circulation they seemingly cease being narratively meaningful or interesting. While the stories of other working women in the novel end in marriage, La Goualeuse seems caught in the pull of prison or the convent as possible sites of her authentic sense of self. The end result for all "reformed" working women, however, is the same: they disappear from both public view and the narrative. The primary difference is, however, that the other women maintain connection with the city – and, therefore, the narrative – via communication with the

[38] They are, for that matter, equally absent from the more official discourse of urban prostitution. Parent-Duchâtelet, for example, discusses charity houses for repentant women by calling their reform into question. Drawing a correlation between the high death rate within them and the women's supposedly disorderly natures, he assumes that they are unable to adjust to the quiet regularity of a more sheltered existence (2: 565).

people who knew them there, rendering their isolation merely geographic. Only La Goualeuse finds her withdrawal – or exclusion – from public life deadly, I argue, because she has severed all connections and friendships with anyone who knew her in her formerly degraded state. Forced to deny her past – and, indeed, her present insecurities and anxieties – she fails to make ontological sense once she is removed from the city.

Once La Goualeuse is outfitted with a new name, new clothes, and a newly erased blank-state of a past, she and Rodolphe learn that, while his money can transform the lives of numerous deserving characters, it cannot prevent the inevitable recognition of the prostitute's body beneath the princess's robes. In a world of masked characters, hers is the body that will not stay hidden as it always reveals itself and is recognized, thus betraying her disguises. Just as she and Rodolphe attempt to leave Paris (and its painful associations) permanently, drunken revelers halt their carriage and La Goualeuse is recognized by two old acquaintances from *la Cité*: the ex-convict Le Chourineur, newly reformed and devoted to her father, and the *ogresse*. Their sudden appearance at the barrier of Paris, however, reminds both father and daughter that the suppressed body has uncanny ways of resurfacing. The fact that the city seems to reassert its power to decode at its very borders only enforces the idea that there is no beyond-the-city where La Goualeuse can rest obscure and unrecognized. Indeed, this double encounter at the barrier only reminds La Goualeuse that a body known to others is not free to cast aside identities at will and, even as her new life is beginning, she realizes the extent to which her past cannot stay behind in the city, for "la mort du Chourineur, l'apparition inattendue de l'ogresse, qui venait réveiller, plus douloureux que jamais, le souvenir de sa dégradation

première, lui paraissaient d'un sinistre présage" (1245). Compellingly, her attempt to leave Paris marks the end of the novel. Just as she can never really leave the city, however, the novel cannot end on this note of deliverance and what follows is a long epilogue devoted to her slow, but eventual, demise in a place ignorant of her existence.

La Goualeuse, one could argue, illustrates the limits of Sue's radicalism, as critics have often read her fate as a sign of his capitulation to the very bourgeois values he critiques throughout the rest of the novel.[39] Although Sue makes a strong case against pigeonholing the urban poor as hopeless cases by demonstrating the extent to which even the most debased types can be raised and transformed into useful citizens, he balks at the idea of granting a sexual blank slate to the prostitute who avows her guilt. Rodolphe, the author's alter ego and the novel's *deus ex machina*, tries to absolve La Goualeuse (once she becomes his daughter) but his miracles fail before his most personal crisis, rendering her eventual abjection all but inevitable. Although, as I have already argued, Sue conforms in every detail to the standard narrative of the redeemed prostitute, ending with a purified death rather than a compromised life, it is equally possible to read La Goualeuse's fate as an indictment of this very narrative. Instead of viewing La Goualeuse as Sue's sacrificial offering to bourgeois conventions of pre-marital virginity, I wonder how our assessment of the novel changes if we consider how La Goualeuse participates in her own undoing. Because she is necessarily excluded from the ideals of femininity that surround her, and by which she is trying to live, La Goualeuse embodies the point in which these ideals break down and their dangerous limits are revealed on the surface of

[39] See Brooks, "Mark of the Beast," 134.

her body. Through her suicidal allegiance to middle class values, she illustrates the consequences of taking the ideals of female sexuality to their obvious and destructive limit since, having internalized the ideals of bourgeois sexuality, she must necessarily take her disguised (but corrupted) body out of circulation as a condition of her allegiance to these very values.

Forced to rely on disguises rather than disclosure, La Goualeuse illustrates both the extent to which appearances dictate social relations in a world of relative strangers and the point at which such facades are deemed untrustworthy. Unlike the other disguised characters – who are only unmasked by Rodolphe's amazing powers of penetration – La Goualeuse is trapped in the prostitute's body, which is always and already a legible surface. As a harbinger of social debauchery and disease, the prostitute was a troublesome urban figure that no amount of romanticizing or gentrifying could mitigate, and, as such, it was imagined as visually distinct from other women. La Goualeuse, then, is always an incongruous, though exceptional, figure: among the destitute, she carries herself with the unmistakable nobility that is her birthright and, once in higher circles, she is ashamed for being unable to conform to her own angelic looks. Ultimately, however, she is only ever an invention of the city – a commodity that loses its ultimate value (including, in her case, self-value) if removed from its urban context. As a legible facet of city life, La Goualeuse, moreover, cannot overwrite that which her recognizable body necessarily signifies to those with a knowledgeable eye. Of course, this fantasy of the prostitute's recognizable body was only ever a fiction, comforting those who wanted to contain the contamination it represented. Sue, it would seem, tries to challenge these

notions of legibility only to create a character who, in the end, cannot fail to recognize herself.

Although the novel begins as a guided tour through the Parisian underworld, it veers away from merely classifying urban types in order to rank these figures on Rodolphe's sliding scale of virtue and villainy. In a world of browbeaten saints and murderous rogues, the legibility of appearances takes on melodramatic proportions as the urban space is increasingly imagined as a conflict zone between the haves and have-nots of society. Indeed, this obsession with the contrast between the high and low, rich and poor, which so enthralled Sue and his readers, came to be imagined more and more as a key feature of urban literature. Sue's London copycat, G.W.M. Reynolds, when writing of the metropolis, described it in terms of the income-binary violently dividing residents from one another, maintaining that "the most unbound wealth is the neighbour of the most hideous poverty; the most gorgeous pomp is placed in strong relief by the most deplorable squalor; the most seducing luxury is only separated by a narrow wall from the most appalling misery."[40] While Reynolds believed that the contrast between excess and depravation led to crime, Sue (as well as many other authors of the nineteenth century) believed that the problems plaguing the metropolis were too complicated to be reduced to the inequalities between the rich and the poor. Nevertheless, certain urban landmarks and figures stood in for the inchoate dangers associated with life in the modern city, as Harvey maintains, stating that "the bourgeoisie feared not only the collapse of public order but also the horror of uncaged emotions, unbridled passions, prostitutes and

[40] G.W.M Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London*, 1844 (Edinburgh: Edinburg UP, 1998) 3.

libidinous women, the explosion of evil from the subterranean Paris of sewers, the haunt of the dangerous classes" (268). Necessarily aware of contemporary fears regarding the city, Sue paints a picture of it that is at once unknowable, and therefore dangerous, and, surprisingly redeemable.

While the urban poor were often equated with the threatening aspects of the city, impoverished working women (such as La Goualeuse, Rigolette, or Louise Morel) became convenient vehicles used to explore and defuse the difficulties of fraught urban relations. Such discursive techniques were common, according to Scott, who maintains that "the metaphoric use of female sexuality to talk about working-class poverty or disorder implied for them a literal solution – attention to the lives and activities of working-class women" (152). As unglamorous and supposedly realistic features of the nineteenth-century city, such women authenticated accounts of urban life while also serving as malleable figures that could be manipulated to capture various attributes that authors wanted the city to evoke – from casual frivolity to frightening destitution. Though La Goualeuse, with her many metamorphoses, can be read as a one-woman exhibit of various feminine types, in the end, she ensures the stability of the class binary by forfeiting her rights to reinvention. In spite of Sue's many efforts to humanize the Parisian underworld through the rendering of working women like La Goualeuse visible, the poverty associated with the city was softened into yet another urban feature to be pondered, regretted, then, perhaps, eventually dismissed by the reader making sense of his surroundings through literature.

Chapter 4: At Home in the City: The Place of Women's Work in G.W.M. Reynolds's *The Seamstress* and Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*

We kissed Charley, and took her down-stairs with us, and stopped outside the house to see her run away to her work. I don't know where she was going, but we saw her run, such a little, little creature, in her womanly bonnet and apron, through a covered way at the bottom of the court; and melt into the city's strife and sound, like a dewdrop in the ocean.
— Esther Summerson in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*

Famously beginning his 1853 novel *Bleak House* with a vision of London as a fog-covered tangle of streets, courtyards, and scurrying inhabitants trying to make sense of it all, Charles Dickens emphasizes the obscure and labyrinthine aspects of the city. In his far less well-known opening to *The Seamstress* (1851), G.W.M. Reynolds similarly situates his heroine in a complex geography of city streets – each loaded with economic and social connotations – which intersect in numerous pockets of illegibility. Comparing the great metropolis to a labyrinth was, as my previous chapter illustrates, commonplace in the nineteenth century, and the metaphor accounted not only for the city's confusing maze of dead-end streets and forking crossroads but also its role as a place of unexpected encounters and missed connections.[1] Indeed, the city, as it was described in both novels, can be conceived as a network of unmapped spaces where a person can be conveniently (or tragically) lost or found. So while Dickens and Reynolds have different things to say

[1] See Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992) 17; and Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000) 4.

about the city and metropolitan life within their remarkably similar novels, they both regard London as a site where obscure nooks vie with grand thoroughfares in shaping characters who remain, to a large extent, unaware of the ways in which geography affects (and reflects) identity. And by exploring the city's power to conceal *and* expose those seeking refuge within its great mansions, humble garrets, and dilapidated ruins, Dickens and Reynolds gesture to the struggle between self and space that we take for granted today but which was just beginning to be articulated – by urban reformers among others – during the Victorian era.[2]

Looking at the way in which working women are particularly (dis)placed within this urban panorama, this chapter considers the extent to which the heroines of these novels attempt to feel "at home" in the city. Part of the reason that finding a place in this urban environment is so difficult is because it is a vastly different London than the one depicted in Dickens's earlier *Sketches by Boz*, and I investigate how working women strive to make room for themselves in a city that does not even acknowledge their existence. That is to say, workers from middle-class backgrounds, like Reynolds's Virginia Mordaunt and Dickens's Esther Summerson, may have captivated the imagination of artists and authors but – as they did not comfortably fall into a predetermined type – they found themselves at odds with their surroundings. Tracing these characters' attempts to change their environments (at the risk of being changed by it themselves), this chapter investigates the process wherein respectable working women

[2] Urban reformers were particularly committed to showing how the crowded lodging houses both caused and exposed the immoral behavior in their tenants. See Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999) 87, 104-107.

carve out urban niches in a space that has little in common with the cities displayed in the panoramic texts or utopian visions explored in the other chapters.

Defining Tavistock Street, the home of his protagonist, as a "dark and sluggish ditch" between "a rushing, roaring torrent on the one hand, and an ever-agitated lake on the other," Reynolds emphasizes the juxtaposition of movement and stagnation associated with the surroundings.[3] Using this aquatic metaphor to describe the rapidly growing city, he underlines, on one hand, the ways in which these contrasting dynamics of motion and stillness are similar to natural – and, therefore, uncontrollable – forces, and, on the other hand, the extent to which the city cannot be understood as a cohesive whole but, rather, as a compilation of oppositions. Indeed, both Reynolds and Dickens insist on depicting London as a split city whose unequal sections intersect at numerous points of tension between worlds of opulence and poverty. The fascination with this imagined divided city was widespread, according to Walkowitz, as "mid-Victorian investigators represented the urban topography of the 'gaslight era' as a series of social juxtapositions of 'high' and 'low' life" (19). While many writers and commentators insisted on the contentious nature of the relationship between the two spheres, Dickens and Reynolds pay particular attention to the mutual contamination that results from the indiscriminate mixing of high and low characters. Indeed, the illegible or labyrinthine aspects of the city are, in many ways, products of such mixings, which confound the strict divisions between various social spaces. So, for example, when Dickens's wealthy Lady Dedlock penetrates the slums to visit an old lover's grave, she transforms the area into an

[3] G.W.M. Reynolds, *The Seamstress* (London: John Dicks, 1853) 1.

awkwardly unlivable space for her already-harassed guide, the homeless street-sweep Jo, by making him witness to her secret shame. While such encounters would have been viewed as highly improbable occurrences by a Victorian readership, they were common enough in literature as mid-century writers struggled to come to terms with the myriad ways the city fostered contact (howsoever strained and restricted) between strangers of unknown origins.

While characters constantly lose themselves (or become lost to others) in the crowded metropolis, nothing remains hidden for very long in the city, which is, first and foremost, a space of movement and agitation. This circulation of people, things, and, of course, money has a profound effect on the legibility of urban spaces, particularly as it disrupts outward trappings of identity (such as occupation, dress, manner, etc.) and destabilizes the boundaries marking social status. In fact, for every movement across horizontal (geographic) space, one can identify a corresponding shift in vertical (hierarchical or social) space that affects not only individual characters but also the larger milieu in which they move. As geographic and social boundaries are transgressed throughout the novels, however, characters discover the consequences of failing to "know one's place" in the greater urban panorama. Although Dickens and Reynolds show the extent to which this is true for both men and women, I argue that – as in Eugène Sue's novel – there is a tendency on the part of these authors to insist that the city reserves its worst temptations and dangers for those who are the least protected. Since Victorian women, in particular, were defined in relation to the spaces they occupied and were typically granted less autonomy in their perambulations across the city, they endured the

worst punishments when venturing to step out of line.[4] While this notion of restricted female freedom is rather obvious (and downright expected in Victorian literature), I find Dickens's and Reynolds's texts compelling insofar as they try to have it both ways with regard to female mobility: depicting disinherited orphans banished from their rightful (elevated) places, they show how unfair such limitations can be, while simultaneously condemning other women (unnatural mothers and dangerous French lady's maids) whose sexual or professional ambitions propel them beyond their prescribed gender roles.

For all the similarities between Dickens and Reynolds, however, they are very different authors with diverse anxieties about urban life. So while there are uncanny likenesses between the plots of *Bleak House* and *The Seamstress* – namely, aristocratic women who secretly give birth to illegitimate daughters before making brilliant marriages; supposedly "orphaned" girls forced (or guided) into appropriately genteel professions; and, finally, French *femmes de chambre* who guess their mistresses' secrets and threaten to ruin the noble families for whom they work – each novel channels its ire onto different societal ills.[5] Dickens's labyrinthine London, for example, is clogged by the workings (or rather non-workings) of an outdated Chancery court, whose utter stagnation contrasts with the troubling mobility of some of his female characters in the

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[4] This argument has, of course, been largely over-simplified. According to Elizabeth Wilson, such a division was a result of its very erasure, for "just as nineteenth-century society was trying to deepen and secure the boundary between public and private, industrial capitalism was erasing it." Elizabeth Wilson, "The Rhetoric of Urban Space," *New Left Review*, 209 (1995): 149.

[5] For further discussion of the similarities between the novels, see Richard Maxwell, who argues that "while *The Seamstress* is much less wide-ranging than either *The Mysteries of London* or *Bleak House*, it demonstrates superbly the degree to which both writers worked with the same kind of material." Richard Maxwell, *The Mysteries of Paris and London* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1992) 198.

novel.[6] Reynolds's critique, on the other hand, is reserved for the dressmaking and sweating industries that rely on the constant migration of women to the city and openly exploit cheap female labor before the eyes of complacent customers. Focusing on the place of working women in the city (and, consequentially, in the novels' plots), I explore how female labor is conceived as a problem of blurred boundaries, as it confounds the division between domestic and public space that was so fiercely championed by Victorian commentators. Moreover, the divide between the social classes was also threatened as workers' access to more elevated circles ends up challenging not only the integrity of those circles but of the working women themselves. Looking at the prominent juxtaposition of city and home in Dickens's and Reynolds's descriptions of working women, I consider the ways in which female labor complicates the division between these locales and confounds the legibility of the spaces typically marked by class.

Working women appear in different guises in each of the two novels: for the bourgeois orphan who suddenly finds herself alone in the world, the need to work is a reminder of her vulnerability; whereas for the French lady's maids, who presumably are of a lower social station, work is a fact of life. Dickens is particularly ambivalent about the loss of status endured by middle class characters fallen upon hard times, exemplified in *Bleak House* by the "orphaned" Esther Summerson.[7] Initially rescued from the utter poverty that would have otherwise engulfed her after the death of her guardian, Esther acquires a mysterious benefactor who equips her with the education necessary for a

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[6] For more about how uncharacteristically (for Dickens) mobile these *Bleak House* women are, see Ellen Moers, "*Bleak House*: the Agitating Women," *Dickensian*, 69 (1973): 21.

[7] For more about Dickens and the impoverished middle-class character, see Alison Byerly, "Effortless Art: The Sketch in Nineteenth-Century Painting and Literature," *Criticism*, 41.3 (1999): 356.

genteel position as a teacher, though she is quickly rescued from that potentially degrading fate as well in order to become a young lady's companion. If Dickens was reluctant to turn his middle-class heroine into a working-class laborer, he was not alone, for according to critic Patricia Zakreski such a deviation from the standard pattern of middle class femininity was difficult for Victorians to accept.[8] Reading Esther's situation along with that of other orphans in *Bleak House* (namely, Guster, the epileptic maid in the Snagsby household, and Charley, the child-laundress who becomes Esther's servant), I argue that Dickens tries to create a model of employment based on socially-sanctioned codes of domesticity in order to propose an alternate – and far less working-class – vision of urban female labor. While Dickens attempts to disguise labor in his more genteel characters, for Reynolds the only thing shameful about work is the deplorable conditions under which some people are forced to earn their living. Just as virtuous and worthy as Esther Summerson, his own heroine Virginia Mordaunt discovers that the city is a cruel place for the unprotected orphan and that hard work guarantees neither continued employment nor a fair wage. While Reynolds seems poised to propose a more radical solution to the problem of urban female labor, he posits no alternative beyond the possibility of marriage or paternal protection, both of which he ultimately deems inadequate.

Although these authors differ in their treatment of female labor – with Dickens attempting to disguise it as a domestic arrangement and Reynolds exaggerating its horrors

[8] "As the public became more aware of the number of middle-class women forced to work, the debates concerning work for women could no longer ignore the more problematic issue of the middle-class woman's place in the commercial sphere." Patricia Zakreski, *Representing Female Artistic Labour, 1848-1890: Refining Work for the Middle-Class Woman* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2006): 32-33.

– they both echo Sue's endorsement of replacing employment with family, or female independence with filial dependence. The obvious problem is that these novels are full of failed families, providing numerous examples of mothers who abandon their children in the name of social advancement or philanthropy, and financially irresponsible fathers who fail to provide for their offspring. The family, in other words, might still appear to be the ideal model of protection, but neither Dickens nor Reynolds seems to have much confidence in its ability to actually insulate one from the dangers and temptations of the city. As a model for employer-employee relations, the family, moreover, only offers a problematic template as confusion and conflict arise in both novels when characters misread (or abuse) the bonds of sympathy that exist between employers and those beneath them. This confusion is particularly evident, as I will show, in the case of the lady's maids who exploit knowledge gained by their proximity to the families they serve. Although such abuses of intimacy are ultimately thwarted in both novels, they gesture toward the inevitable danger of incorporating relative strangers (and social inferiors) within the family fold. So while the city threatens the safety and purity of working women bereft of parental protection, incorporating economically dependent women into private homes poses a danger to families, rendering inadequate the facile solution of a family model for troublesome employer-employee relations faced by Dickens's and Reynolds's Victorian readership.

This cross-contamination between people and space (in these fictional realms where cities endanger women, but women endanger homes) is symptomatic of the genre in which Reynolds and Dickens were working. Focusing on the mysterious, unknowable,

or illegible aspects of the city, these authors borrow conventions established by theatrical melodrama, especially as it staged gothic themes. With their elaborate plots and obscured family connections revealed via dropped, lost, or misdirected letters, Reynolds and Dickens capture the confusion fostered by city life through their depictions of a universe where communication is haphazard and important messages are conveyed only inadvertently.[9] Arguing, in this instance, that art (to a degree) imitates life, critic Louis James maintains that, in spite of its preponderance of improbabilities, the melodramatic genre effectively echoed aspects of the metropolis as "the labyrinthine plots of melodrama, with their extraordinary coincidences and marvelous resolutions, reflected the invisible working of providence, while the many disguises and startling revelations of identity embodied the fragmented consciousness of modern urban life."[10] Suffering from the mysteries of unknown parentage, anonymous benefactors, and, as the plots progress, love stories that hinge on questions of respectability or legitimacy, the heroines of *The Seamstress* and *Bleak House* struggle against such fragmentation as they try to come to terms with their ambiguous identities and contested places within the social hierarchies of the city.[11] So while the issues of urban poverty and female labor that Reynolds and Dickens address fall, perhaps, more in the realm of realism, these authors treat the metropolis (and their heroines' places within in) as an inherently mysterious, if not

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[9] Much attention has been given to the importance of documents within Dickens's novel, particularly by J. Hillis Miller who maintains that "*Bleak House* is a document about the interpretation of documents." J. Hillis Miller, *Victorian Subjects* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991) 179.

[10] Louis James, "Time, Politics and the Symbolic Imagination in Reynolds's Social Melodrama," *G.W.M. Reynolds: Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Politics, and the Press*, ed. Anne Humpherys and Louis James (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008) 183.

[11] While Esther is associated with Bleak House, which is not located in the city, I argue below that both she and the house are intrinsically linked to the urban environment.

romantic, space where streets change the course of people's lives, buildings both hide and expose, and institutions have the power to corrupt those associated with them.

Although I argue that Reynolds and Dickens similarly treat the city as a gothic space to be negotiated by heroines deficient in worldly knowledge, neither author would have invited the comparison between them. An unabashed plagiarist, Reynolds was viewed as an incendiary hack who – only by pandering to base public taste – managed to sell more books than his more respectable colleagues. In spite of the obvious (and numerous) shortcomings of Reynolds's fiction, his enormously popular *Mysteries of London* (which was directly inspired, of course, by Sue's text) paved the way for other authors to use gothic descriptions in representations of urban life.[12] The development of an urban Gothic, initiated by Reynolds and nuanced by Dickens, allowed these authors to explore the potential horror of the new and sprawling metropolis, which was a site of fascination and anxiety for those who sang the praises of modern urbanity as well as those who feared the pernicious effects of anonymity and isolation fostered by city life.[13] Considering the representations of urban working women in this light, I acknowledge the extent to which both authors rely on mysterious family ties, compromised secrets, and the inevitable revelations these dramatic elements entail, although I choose to focus on the

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[12] See Maxwell, 197.

[13] According to Anne Humphreys, "the mysteries novel could not come into being until the modern city itself was visible, until the effects of rapid expansion and change were evident in the disappearance of the old and construction of the new, until the unavoidable and startling contrasts between classes of people and places that resulted from rapid growth were a commonplace, and most importantly, until the institutional structures which were to manage growth and control its results were a recognized part of urban life." Anne Humpherys, "Generic Strands and Urban Twists: The Victorian Mysteries Novel," *Victorian Studies*, 34.4 (1991): 456.

more literal and concrete place of working women in an environment that is, at once, dangerously hostile and surprisingly cohesive.

The Orphan as Urban Other

Like the streets of London, the pages of Victorian literature were overrun with friendless orphans and, just as society struggled to find a suitable place for them in the city, authors seemed equally troubled at containing them within their narratives. At once victims (completely dependent upon an indifferent and often cruel society) and potentially dangerous outsiders (who, like William Thackeray's Becky Sharp could insinuate themselves into families only to exploit and destroy them), these fictional orphans were ungrounded figures that disrupted the idealized family upon which so much of Victorian ideology was based. Indeed, the orphan was, according to critic Laura Peters, the familial and societal Other upon whom insecurities regarding the stability of both entities could be projected; and she argues that "the notion of the orphan as *unheimlich* and by that nature repressed (either discursively or through criminalization or emigration), indicates that the orphan as a figure continues to provoke in the larger family – society – fear, anxiety, guilt and inadequacy by its presence."[14] While authors were most often prone to cast orphans in a sympathetic light, these characters were – as Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre so brilliantly illustrates – nevertheless regarded as rebels with the moral authority to demand redress for abuses inflicted by greedy institutions (such as the Lowood school) or neglectful extended families. This saturation of

[14] Laura Peters, *Orphan Texts: Victorian orphans, culture and empire* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000) 23.

ambivalently depicted orphans notwithstanding, Dickens and Reynolds both seem hesitant to implicate their orphaned girls as potential threats. Saddled with the additional taint of illegitimacy, Virginia and Esther possess, moreover, an acute sense of place which renders it all but impossible for them to impose on either the families that eventually care for them or the families that, in their shame, initially rejected them.

In spite of their different senses of entitlement vis-à-vis their extended families or society in general, what Becky Sharp, Jane Eyre, Virginia Mordaunt, and Esther Summerson have in common is the need to procure a living in a way that the middle class, with which they are all associated, could find more or less acceptable. Focusing on Virginia and Esther – heroines of texts that exaggerate or elide the difficulties faced by working women – I explore diverse reactions to the very necessity of female labor among this social class so closely associated with the ideal of a female domesticity predicated on financial stability. Not all middle-class women who worked were orphans, of course, but girls without a father's monetary aid or mother's moral influence were the ones hanging most precariously onto their former class status. Mixing remunerative labor and gentility was naturally a challenge that left one with limited options, since as Lynn Alexander argues, "regardless of the circumstances surrounding a woman's decision to work, in the mid-nineteenth century only two acceptable options were available to middle-class women: governesses or seamstresses."[15] While most fictional depictions of governesses show them sequestered within bourgeois or aristocratic households in relatively rural

[15] Lynn Alexander, *Women, Work, and Representation: Needlewomen in Victorian Art and Literature* (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2003) 4.

locales, seamstresses were, by and large, an urban phenomenon.[16] And while the governess was a vulnerable figure – dependent on the good will of capricious employers who often did not know how to treat employees that were equal to them in both education and social pedigree – seamstresses more thoroughly captured the popular imagination as embodiments of the precariousness of urban life, where one was often left hanging onto survival by the slenderest thread.

The Seamstress in the Unhomely City

To be orphaned was to turn Victorian women into what they were not supposed – or even expected – to be: friendless and independent. While some orphans were lucky enough to have benefactors, those anxious on the behalf of the group in general focused on the plight of the ones left to make their own way in life. When she is suddenly orphaned at the age of 15, *The Seamstress*'s Virginia Mordaunt is – like any other typical middle-class young lady – entirely unprepared to support herself. In spite of what she calls her "respectable education," sewing is the only skill she can use to her monetary advantage (40). Anyone less conscious of maintaining her respectability in the face of her financial (and personal) hardships would have most likely gone into domestic service, which was precisely what lower-class orphans were expected to do.[17] Trading financial security for the semblance of gentility, however, Virginia embraces the image (as well as

[16] There are, of course, numerous important exceptions, namely among Elizabeth Gaskell's heroines. Rural Ruth Hilton (*Ruth*, 1853) becomes an apprentice in a village and working-class Mary Barton (of the 1848 eponymous novel) trades factory work for more genteel dress-making in a northern industrial town. I am not focusing on these novels that really do play with the "type" of the sewing woman – particularly in regards to her sexual availability – because neither is a metropolitan figure.
[17] See Peters, 13.

the drawbacks) of a well known, and highly sympathetic, urban type.[18] Romanticized versions of destitute seamstresses abound in Victorian art and literature and most depictions follow a similar pattern, for, according to Alexander, "although no presentation is an exact copy of the one preceding it, the similarities are unmistakable: the typical fictional seamstress is young, often around sixteen years of age; of the middle-class, but impoverished; from the country; and with no feminine role model (her mother is either dead or ineffective)" (34). So while Virginia is an exceptional figure among the rough and rowdy neighbors filling the various working-class dwellings she inhabits, her virtue and resignation are established attributes marking the kind of middle-class working woman that she represents.

As a fairly standard incarnation of the worthy and exploited Victorian seamstress, Virginia is first introduced while working through the night in her impoverished, but scrupulously clean, garret apartment. Perched above the sleeping city, Virginia's garret is thematically significant in that it both overlooks and is overlooked by the urban labyrinth below, since according to T.J. Edelstein, "that a room at the top of the house gives her a view – a view of the Victorian city – is … important. It is this view that gives the seamstress some universality, that places her within the general problem of urbanization. She symbolizes not only the new hidden problems of the city but also the essence of the city / country dichotomy" (205). As ubiquitous, but largely invisible, urban landmarks, seamstresses sequestered in their garrets represented more than just the inevitable victims

[18] Reynolds intended to have a whole series entitled "The Slaves of England." For more about the orphaned seamstress as a stock literary character, see T.J. Edelstein, "They Sang 'The Song of the Shirt': The Visual Iconology of the Seamstress," *Victorian Studies* 23.2 (1980): 189.

of capitalism in the Victorian imagination. After the 1843 publication of Thomas Hood's poem "The Song of the Shirt" and the 1846 exhibition of Richard Redgrave's painting *The Sempstress*, the figure of the seamstress was thrust center stage as a significant cultural icon even as it was simultaneously exiled to the city's obscure garrets.[19] For all her prominence in art and literature, in other words, the seamstress was never imagined as a public figure with a visible presence in the city. The fact, then, that Virginia is first introduced within her attic room automatically depoliticizes her (in spite of Reynolds's known radical bent) and situates her within the romanticized discourse surrounding these common urban types.

Just as city space – defined by neighborhood or street – reveals significant insights into the location's inhabitants (identifying them in terms of economic status, gentility, and even profession), the initial description of Virginia's pathetic garret attests to her unassailable respectability. Relying on the convention of representing the seamstress's scanty belongings to signify the paucity of her property and, more importantly, clues about her general character, Reynolds catalogues Virginia's possessions in order to paint a picture of her as someone at once modest and deprived. If the Victorian home was imagined as a supremely private space meant to insulate the family from the chaotic world outside, Virginia's garret, in its barren state, fails to offer

[19] While Hood's poem and Redgrave's painting were undoubtedly influential works that inspired later, similar, literary and visual works, it is impossible to reduce the entire cultural phenomenon of the fictional seamstress to a single, original source. See, for example, Peter Simonsen, "'Would that its Tone Could Reach the Rich!' Thomas Hood's Periodical Poetry Bridging Romantic and Victorian," *Romantic Textualities: Literature and Print Culture, 1780-1840* 16 (2006): 57.

her the same level of privacy and protection.[20] Unlike her well-dressed neighbor, Julia Barnet, or the duchess of Belmont (to whom she delivers a dress), Virginia and her paltry goods are laid bare for the world (or obtrusive readers) to see: "a neat straw-bonnet, a shawl, and a cotton dress, were suspended to pegs in one corner of the room; and a band-box contained a few other necessaries belonging to the scanty wardrobe of the young person who occupied this miserable attic" (1). Her private space limited to the confines of a band-box, Virginia literally has nothing to hide, unlike the other two women who stash incriminating gifts from male admirers in the confines of cupboards, in the one case, and dark secrets in the sheltered space of a luxurious boudoir, in the other. This transparency is a mark, of course, of Virginia's respectability, but it also reveals the extent to which the poor, in general, were unable to shield themselves from the prying – and presumably all-seeing – eyes of social commentators who were concerned with, or merely interested in, the living conditions within the urban slums.[21] Although it is antithetical to her nature to be secretive, Virginia clearly recognizes the value of a private, inviolable space when she – having procured a trunk in a brief period of economic good fortune later in the novel – is able to lock away a past she would just as soon forget. The very conventions regarding literary and artistic renditions of the seamstress's garret, however, render it

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[20] Marcus questions this tendency to shield the middle-class home from prying eyes – as it was often the subject of Victorian realist novels, with their imperative to *show* all – but it is nevertheless true that reformers and social investigators only ever peered into and exposed the quarters of London's poorest residents (126).

[21] In many of Henry Mayhew's interviews with seamstresses, for example, he includes a list of their property (including clothing). For instance, when describing the distressed genteel needlewoman, he enumerates not only the goods still in her possession, but the ones she has already pawned for cash as well. Henry Mayhew, *Voices of the Poor: Selections from the* Morning Chronicle *'Labour and the Poor (1849-50)*, ed. Anne Humphreys (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1971) 75. See Marcus, 107.

infinitely describable and so such fleeting moments of privacy (the hallmark, of course, of middle-class respectability) are, for Virginia, always temporary and short-lived.

Virginia's garret not only fails to provide her the privacy seen as a necessary attribute of the Victorian home, but it also blurs the boundary between public and private spheres that the home was supposed to maintain. Sewing in her room, the home is contaminated by this ruminative labor to the extent that, exhausted and overworked, she becomes alienated from the very space meant to serve as a refuge as much as a workroom: "so unnaturally over-wrought are her physical energies that her mental faculties are becoming bewildered: she loses sight of her own identity – she forgets where she is – a hurry, a confusion, and a droning hum take possession of her brain, – and yet she continues to ply the needle with a sort of automaton accuracy" (3). Virginia can forget where she is only because she inhabits a negative space – a place that is neither home nor workshop but rather only an uncomfortable – if not, for the dazed inhabitant, an ontologically impossible – mixture of the two. The London lodging house was, according to Marcus, necessarily a site of such internal conflict as "its epitomization of urban ills made the lodging house thoroughly antidomestic, both because it typified the city (which…was opposed to the home) and because the imagery of dirt and contagion contradicted the domestic ideal's emphasis on cleanliness and order" (104-105). In spite of her hyperbolic cleanliness, Virginia cannot avoid the contagion caused by her exposure to less virtuous – or less "middle-class" – neighbors. Employed by the bed-ridden woman on the first floor (who pays Virginia a pittance to do work contracted out to herself) and then later aided by Julia, a kept woman from the floor below, Virginia

need not even venture beyond the home before confronting the realities of economic and sexual exploitation notoriously plaguing working women in London.

In spite of Virginia's association with her spotless garret, it is only ever an unstable space as, throughout the novel, she ends up moving to three other domiciles spread across the city in an attempt to escape the pursuit of a lover with seemingly ambiguous motives. Each foray into the streets of London reinforces the orphan's sense of her vulnerability, as she is first exposed to her own powerlessness vis-à-vis the sweating system (after following a dress she has made and discovering the true cost of luxurious clothing) and later she is confronted by a persistent admirer (who insists that his love is honorable even after Virginia learns that he is, in fact, Julia's lover). Moreover, while she lives and works in the same small (albeit changing) room, she must venture out to seek employment when her association with the Tavistock street tenants comes to an end. If the streets – which are literally haunted by Charles, her aristocratic stalker – leave her vulnerable, Virginia finds that other peoples' homes offer no better retreat. When she is forced to hire herself out helping housewives with their sewing, she finds that these middle-class homes are not idealized abodes of peace and respectability after all but, rather, places of degradation as "…the poor seamstress was looked upon as a being whom the ladies might make the butt of their ill-humour, petty spite, whims, and caprices – and whom the gentlemen were at perfect liberty to regard as a fitting object for their insolent overtures and disgusting impertinences" (100). Refusing to integrate the working-class woman into their homes, Virginia's middle-class employers transform their domestic interiors into pockets of street-like space where the seamstress has already

learned to expect both scorn and harassment. Between a barren garret – which fails to provide either privacy or an escape from her public persona as a seamstress – , the exposure of the streets, and the disruption of middle-class codes of domesticity and gender relations caused by a working-class "intrusion," the entire city is imagined as a hostile environment for the genteel needlewoman who remains nevertheless economically dependant upon it.

Following Virginia's peregrinations across London, one notices how her life-changing encounters are geographically plotted as to remind readers of the pedagogic function of place. While most Victorians would have read about the exploitation of needlewomen in newspapers and parliamentary reports, Virginia discovers the extent to which she is underpaid only when she follows the dress that she is making at the start of the novel as it passes through London on its circuitous route to its final customer: starting in the apartment of the middle-woman who hired Virginia, on to the more financially-prosperous second middle-woman, to the French boutique where the dress was commissioned, and finally the duchess's boudoir, the velvet ball gown links the disparate spaces that would otherwise never be in communication with one another. Although the likelihood of a Victorian sweated-worker ever coming into contact with a customer wearing the sartorial product over which she worked was slim, this trajectory from garret to boudoir illustrates the sordid side to the luxury trade as, with each stop along the dress's journey to its final destination, the price received for making it goes up while the actual labor involved decreases. The final delivery of the gown to the duchess of Belmont, is, moreover, a moment of multiple discoveries, as the *grande dame* – while

Virginia puzzles out the intricacies and abuses of the sweating system – realizes that the poor needlewoman is the illegitimate daughter she sent off to be raised by a trusted family servant. Discovering that her daughter is now "orphaned" and working as a humble seamstress, the duchess retreats even deeper into the private space of her bedroom, leaving Virginia alone in the boudoir and in utter ignorance of her true parentage. Literally hiding in order to preserve both her privacy and composure, the duchess is of course fully protected within this sheltered space and her secret remains unexposed.

While the relationship between Virginia and the duchess is ultimately more complicated than that between worker and customer, the image that serves as the novel's frontispiece visually plays upon the numerous connections and divisions between the different worlds – those of labor and leisure – inhabited by the two women. Henry Anelay's illustration depicts two scenes – Virginia in her garret sewing the ball gown and the duchess in a crowded ballroom wearing the same dress – which are vertically divided by a massive pair of scissors even as they are horizontally aligned by several spools of thread [figure 4.1]. For all the differences in the two opposing locales, however, viewers are meant to notice the commonalities since, according to Zakreski, "the physiognomic similarity between mother and daughter emphasizes that the position of each on either side of the needle is a mere matter of circumstance, that the reduced gentlewoman and the feminine ideal are exchangeable in all but means" (62). Moreover, if the seamstress's face is already present (through her shared resemblance with her mother) in the elevated and exclusive ballroom, one could argue that the illegitimacy and poverty that the

Figure 4.1 Henry Anelay, "The Seamstress," (London: John Dicks, 1853) 5.

seamstress represents have already contaminated the loftier sphere. While other characters will more overtly attempt to penetrate the aristocratic circle represented by this ballroom scene – namely Clementine, the ambitious lady's maid, and Collins, the calculating lawyer who owns the duke's numerous debts – they fail (whereas Virginia does succeed, in a sense, to bring down the noble house) because their claims are unfounded. Anelay's image reminds viewers then that, if the worlds of the garret and ballroom are simultaneously divided and connected, it is only because Virginia has a

legitimate claim to both spaces – a contradiction that haunted Victorians who tried to protect the home from such indiscriminate mixings.

While Virginia's visit to the duchess's boudoir illustrates the discrepancy between the cost of high fashion and the pittance received for producing it, her subsequent detour through Julia's apartment only advances her education. Once a struggling seamstress herself, Julia argues that all such women are eventually reduced to the choice between starvation and sexual impurity – and that, contrary to popular Victorian belief, working women did not make such a decision lightly:

> I did not make society as it is: I was into it such as it is – I was compelled, willing or unwilling, to yield to the circumstances arising from its false, its vitiated, its unjust condition and influence. I would have remained virtuous if the world had allowed me. But it would not. Poverty – cold – disappointment – hunger – crushing toil – and rags, – these are the enemies which strike at the most rigid virtue with the fury of a battering-ram. (43)

While readers are meant to see Julia as a flawed character (as she admits to avoiding hard work and enjoying the luxuries her role as a kept woman affords), she nevertheless only echoes what social investigators, such as Henry Mayhew, were simultaneously disclosing: for the underpaid needlewoman, prostitution provided the supplementary income necessary to ward off starvation (85). For all the apparent veracity of Julia's argument, however, neither Virginia nor the reader can fail to notice how decadent and self-indulgent the girl's apartment appears in contrast to Virginia's poor, but respectable, garret:

> A good carpet – a warm hearth-rug – a French japan bedstead, with dimity curtains hanging from a horizontal pole – half-a-dozen neat chairs – a table in the middle of the room, and another in a corner for the toilette – drapery to the window – a bright fender and polished fire-irons – and

> several mantel-ornaments, – all these articles gave to the place an air of comfort contrasting strongly and forcibly with the cheerless aspect of Virginia's own poor garret. (18)

Juxtaposing Julia's diatribe against the exploitative system with her questionable love of comfort and finery, Reynolds undermines her eloquent condemnations by implying that the desire for luxury – rather than mere survival – leads working-women into prostitution. So while, ultimately, Julia is absolutely correct when she tells Virginia that the seamstress's fate is fixed (and literally predicting the sexually pure needlewoman's necessary demise), she is nevertheless compromised vis-à-vis her own decision to survive.[22]

In spite of Virginia's many advantages – her upper-class birth (which she only learns of on her death bed) and the love she inspires in an aristocrat willing, even, to marry her – she is, first and foremost, a fictional Victorian seamstress and therefore bound to this figure's bleak and limited fate. By showing her in countless locales – ranging from her various garrets, lodging houses, and tenements to an assortment of city streets and the more comfortable homes of others – Reynolds underlines the extent to which she cannot be imagined beyond these unstable (because endlessly interchangeable) urban spaces. Indeed, while her superlative qualities make it rather difficult to label her a typical working woman, her appearance in these numerous locations renders it possible to imagine her as a universal figure multiplied in the countless garrets and thoroughfares scattered throughout the mid-nineteenth-century city. Virginia, however, *is* exceptional

[22] Virginia's predictable (and disappointing?) death – as opposed to a compromised survival – contrasts with the choice made by the heroine Ellen Monroe of Reynolds's *The Mysteries of London*. Ellen, like Julia, decides to ward off starvation by adopting a more lucrative "career." While neither Julia nor Ellen is the straightforward and uncomplicated heroine that Virginia is, they are the working women who survive.

and her ability to penetrate even the most seemingly inappropriate spaces (such as a ducal boudoir and ballroom) alerts readers to the extent to which hers is a haunting presence invented to shame, rile, and motivate an otherwise complacent Victorian audience. Looking back to Anelay's frontispiece and noticing how her face is doubled on both sides of the dividing line, moreover, one is forced to wonder which side actually constitutes her rightful place. Virginia's legitimate claim to both spaces – and her actual dismissal to the various bleak corners of the city – forces one to rethink the spatial marginalization of working women in Reynolds's London, where high and low social sectors are connected through secret blood ties that are only ever accidentally exposed through the creation and purchase of a dress.

The Domesticated Orphan Making the City Home

Starving needlewomen languishing in their garrets may have populated Reynolds's imagination and fiction, but, in turning to Dickens, one confronts a different vision of London, which is remarkably less hostile to women workers. What *Bleak House* lacks in perishing seamstresses, however, it more than makes up for in orphaned women forced to eke out a living in the capital. For the working-class orphans, Charley (who becomes a laundress and then Esther's maid) and Guster (the Snagby's epileptic servant who was raised in an orphanage), the city – while not exactly menacing – is still a somewhat-threatening space against which one must take precautions. Going out to work, for example, Charley locks her younger siblings up in their room, securing their safety through confinement. Guster's movements are also contained, but her voluntary sequestration in the Snagsby's kitchen is due to her tendency to lose herself in "fits."

While Charley barricades her siblings against potential dangers and Guster isolates herself due to the real, but neurologically-induced, threat of physical pain, Dickens's middle-class heroine moves unrestricted throughout city and country without any consciousness of vulnerability. As a homeless housekeeper, Esther is constructed as a domestic ideal even as she is associated with a multitude of homes (her godmother's house in Windsor, Greenleaf school in Reading, the Jellybys' house, Bleak House, Chesney Wold, Boythorn's house in Lincolnshire, the brickmaker's hovel) and public spaces, including, not least, the streets of London. If it is true that, as J. Hillis Miller maintains, "*Bleak House* is an imitation in words of the culture of a city," one wonders how Esther – who, until the end of the novel, fits in everywhere but belongs nowhere – manages to defy the ethos of the metropolis even as she remains deeply part of it.[23] How is it, in other words, that a city defined by Dickens as stagnant, muck-ridden, and – given the fates of its unluckiest male characters such as Jo and Nemo – deadly can also provide an endless succession of homes for the homeless orphan? Whereas Reynolds, in *The Seamstress*, presents a series of rooms that can never be homes, Esther is a home-creator, spreading her domestic creed and comfort wherever she goes, thereby serving as an agent – if not *the* agent – of cohesion as she joins together the disparate spaces of Dickens's London.

While many critics have noted the extent to which *Bleak House*'s London is unified by a superfluity of legal documents that manage, somehow, to join an improbable cast of characters and a vast array of places in the stifling confines of Chancery, few have

[23] J. Hillis Miller, 179.

considered Esther's role in bridging high and low social spheres in order to infuse and transform them with her wholesome middle-class-ness.[24] The two visions of the city proposed by Dickens – the dystopic one tangled up in the interminable workings of Chancery and the more redemptive one blossoming under Esther's (and her future husband, Dr. Allan Woodcourt's) influence – are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, some of the court's most prominent victims (like Gridley – i.e., the man from Shropshire – or Richard Carstone) benefit the most from the solicitous and homely care of others. While it is, to a certain extent, true that, as critic Allan Pritchard argues, "at the center of *Bleak House* lies the unprecedented subject of the great modern city and its horrors, a city on a larger scale than had previously been known," this anxious anti-urbanism is mollified by the interconnected aspects of the city, which enable the good influence that Esther embodies to permeate numerous spaces.[25] Moreover, although it is a novel almost excessively full of tragic deaths, few characters actually die alone – though there are, of course, obvious exceptions, such as Nemo, Krook, and Lady Dedlock. Being on the verge of death, in other words, literally opens up doors since even the most victimized and abandoned characters, such as the street-sweep Jo, find refuge and fellowship in a city that provided neither in life.

With London at the center of the novel, even such non-London locales as Bleak House and Chesney Wold get caught up in this interconnected urban web – either because, as critic Alan Burke argues, they too are trapped in Chancery, or, rather, because

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[24] The connectedness is, however, apparent, as Hillis Miller attests to, stating that "the network of relations among the various characters is a miniature version of the interconnectedness of people in all levels of society" (180).

[25] Allan Pritchard, "The Urban Gothic of *Bleak House*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 45.4 (1991): 433.

they serve as the model home and anti-home to Esther's project of city-wide domestication.[26] Her special talent lies less in the transformation of actual spaces (for, as we know, the Jellyby house only falls further into ruin after her departure) and is best evinced by her ability to turn other women into models of herself.[27] Inspiring Caddy Jellyby, for example, to trade her slovenly ways for the bustling industriousness that is Esther's own trademark, this paragon of domesticity literally multiplies herself for the good of society. It should be noted, however, that while her domestic attributes make her a model for other women, she has no other women to look to for examples. Indeed, in *Bleak House*, men tend to be the more competent (and compassionate) caregivers. Esther's own salvation from a life on the streets is achieved through the charity of her guardian and, although Jarndyce is the most prominent male do-gooder in the novel, he is joined by Nemo, Snagsby, and George Rouncewell, all of whom look after Jo (albeit inadequately) from time to time. The women who purport to help others – Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle – are rather famous failures since they refuse to limit themselves to their domestic spheres.[28] In Esther's case, however, the domestic is any space she

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[26] Alan Burke, "The Strategy and Theme of Urban Observation in *Bleak House*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 9.4 (1969): 664.

[27] Even Inspector Bucket notices her exemplary character and calls her "a pattern." Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002) 785.

[28] Many critics have noted that Dickens's celebration of Esther (and subsequent condemnation of the "professional" charitable ladies) is based on her role as housekeeper, or her limiting her circle of influence to the domestic sphere. Indeed, according to critic Martin Danahay, care giving and working are separate for Dickens as he "has Esther Summerson carry out a form of labor restricted completely to the domestic sphere and represents it in such a way that does not acknowledge its status as work." What Danahay fails to see, however, is the extent to which the "restriction" of the home is hardly a limitation at all as she works her domestic magic is a vast array of homes. Martin Danahay, "Housekeeping and Hegemony in *Bleak House*," *Studies in the Novel*, 23.4 (1991): 419.

inhabits, which is why she, like her male guardian, can carry her good works beyond the literal home.

For all of Esther's incessant bustling, she is also an observer, endowed with a talent for seeing through charades (as she is the one who first detects the dangerous side of Skimpole's child-like nature) and for grasping the big picture, even when it is composed of diverse elements.[29] Walking through London her very first morning in town, for example, she manages to see all in a single glance: "I admired the long successions and varieties of streets, the quantity of people already going to and fro, the number of vehicles passing and repassing, the busy preparations in the setting forth of shop windows and the sweeping out of shops, and the extraordinary creatures in rags, secretly groping among the swept-out rubbish for pins and other refuse" (49). Hers is a sensitive, compassionate, and, ultimately, active eye that is able to translate seeing into doing. Forever associated with the home, Esther is, moreover, surprisingly active and mobile, bringing her mission of domestication to far-flung locales. Indeed, according to critic Ellen Moers, one can go so far as to associate her with movement, rather than her role as Bleak House's keeper, as "she visits the Inns of Court and the back streets of London, covers the countryside with Inspector Bucket, inspects the habitations of rural poverty and landed aristocracy. Her freedom of motion, far from the confines of Bleak House, is of course a precondition of her role as narrator of a wide-ranging tale" (20). While Esther's movement is undoubtedly tied to her narrative, it also situates her at the center of a novel that bemoans the general lack of such fruitful industry in the modern city.

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[29] Numerous critics have criticized her as a narrator (maintaining that she should stay at home supervising the jam pots). But, according to Burke, Esther is an observer of the city (667).

While a destructively stagnant entity, Dickens's London is nevertheless full of professional men – such as Inspector Bucket, Dr. Woodcourt, and numerous lawyers – that critics have identified as dynamic and modernizing forces in the novel. Often overlooked, however, is Esther's own professional training as a teacher and her subsequent ability to earn a living while shaping the lives of others.[30] Although her teaching career is narratively overshadowed by her role as housekeeper, she passes six years at Greenleaf School before being summoned to London and her new "occupation" there. Presumably qualified to teach an array of subjects, Esther limits her descriptions of Greenleaf to her role as comforter and nurturer to the new and homesick pupils, consequentially downplaying her activities as work. Such reticence was, of course, in keeping with Dickens's limited vision of female labor, for according to critic Michael Slater,

> he was wholly sympathetic towards women whose employment lay in such traditional female domains as primary education, nursing, needlework and the decorative arts. In all these spheres single women, or those who had become the breadwinners for their families, could be seen as worthily turning to account their womanly talents and aptitudes, the very things that made them good wives and mothers and creators of domestic charm or elegance.[31]

Although one of the most industrious workers in the novel, Esther's labor is always disguised, even, according to Danahay, from herself: "her narrative is peppered with gaps and elisions that denote the space of unconsciousness Dickens had to create to enable Esther both to work and not be damagingly aware that she is a 'working woman'" (419).

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[30] Indeed, because he only views Esther as a housekeeper, Danahay argues that her labor is always overshadowed by the professionalized work performed by men in the novel (418).
[31] Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1983) 334.

So while Esther's scope extends, as I have argued, far beyond the confines of a single middle-class home, she is nevertheless an ambiguous model for working women as her labor is only ever marginally recognized – and never monetarily rewarded – as work.

While Esther's labor is more or less disguised as familial care-giving, there are numerous other working women in the novel to remind readers that such women were an important element of the urban panorama. Although these women filled the industrial city, however, Dickens only seems to represent female labor as it was performed in the home. Working-class orphans, such as Charley and Guster, for example, carry out domestic tasks in the homes of others and, while undoubtedly vulnerable to the tempers of irascible women such as Mrs. Snagsby, they find themselves far better situated than the homeless street-sweep Jo, who attempts to support himself by performing domesticity (i.e. sweeping) outside the home in the city at large. The more ambiguously classed Caddy Jellyby – who, by the end of the novel, runs her husband's dancing school – and Mrs. Rouncewell – housekeeper of Chesney Wold – are depicted as not only respectable but downright commendable for the ways in which their commitment to family finds expression in their ruminative labor. Knowing that he can, in fact, construct a comfortable vision of female labor, one must wonder why Dickens spares Esther by providing her with a guardian rather than an employer. Ultimately, there is no explanation beyond the mysterious workings of "Providence," for as Jarndyce's lawyer explains to Esther,

> Mr. Jarndyce … being aware of the — I would say, desolate — position of our young friend, offers to place her at a first-rate establishment; where her education shall be completed, where her comfort shall be secured, where her reasonable wants shall be anticipated, where she shall be

> eminently qualified to discharge her duty in that station of life unto which it has pleased — shall I say Providence? — to call her. (22)

While Esther could have undoubtedly been forced to enter into domestic service like Charley and Guster, she is a special case and, as such, makes *Bleak House*'s London seem drastically more congenial to female orphans than the city as depicted by most other Victorian writers.[32]

As charitable as the city ultimately is to Esther – claiming the life of her guilty mother but sparing, indeed celebrating, her own – her happy ending through marriage with Dr. Woodcourt relies on her removal from London. Having been willing to sacrifice herself to duty (i.e. by agreeing to marry Jarndyce), she is rewarded with a home of her own in Yorkshire. The house, moreover, proves to be her final act of home-making by proxy for Jarndyce has set it up according to her system, as Esther herself quickly notices: "I saw, in the papering on the walls, in the colors of the furniture, in the arrangement of all the pretty objects, *my* little tastes and fancies, *my* little methods and inventions which they used to laugh at while they praised them, my odd ways everywhere" (838). Much has been made of this doubled house, named Bleak House and modeled on the first, but rather than seeing it, as critic Kevin McLaughlin does, as "self-estranged through a process of mimetic reproduction," one could also view the house as a necessary expression of Esther's legacy, which, ultimately, is as much pedagogical – as

[32] On the other hand, critics often cite the example of Jo to show what a hostile and uninhabitable place Dickens imagined London to be. Putting Esther and Jo in the same novel – and, of course, having their paths cross in important, plot-shaping ways – can be viewed as Dickens's juxtaposition of romance and realism. What is essential to note, however, is that neither vision predominates – they both find their space in the novel and in the city.

she can teach others to follow her model – as it is domestic.[33] By the time she leaves her multitude of homes in the city behind, in other words, and takes up a more permanent residence within a single home, her physical presence is no longer needed because others have already learned, and started to emulate, her domestic ways. Famously ending with the termination of the interminable case of Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce that releases the main characters from the city's grip, *Bleak House* leaves readers with a double vision: Chancery – as a system haunting the city that can only ever implode upon itself – is balanced by Esther's quieter domestic system that manages, like the law, to cross through and transform London's disparate sectors.

Social Cross-Dressing and the French *Femme de Chambre*

Bleak House may end with the image of a happy family isolated and protected from the dangers of the city, but Dickens rarely grants such haven-status to his fictional homes. Indeed, both he and Reynolds insist on the penetrability of most homes and the extent to which the borders between interior space and the world outside is only ever tenuously maintained.[34] The city, in other words, can never be fully expelled from the domestic realm as the flow of people, messages, documents, and objects in and out of houses facilitates the entry of dangerous – because foreign and unhomely – influences. It is important to note, however, the neither Reynolds nor Dickens ever tries to enshrine the

[33] Kevin McLaughlin, "Losing One's Place: Displacement and Domesticity in Dickens's *Bleak House*," *MLN* 108.5 (1993): 885.

[34] *Bleak House*, in particular, is largely about the impossibility of such clear demarcations. Boundaries – legal, geographic, and interpersonal – are continuously questioned, challenged, and disputed throughout the novel. The original Bleak House, for example, is "contaminated" by visitors such as Harold Skimpole – who freeloads off of the generous inhabitants – and Jo, who brings smallpox into house and contaminates those within.

home as a mythic space besieged by a more corrupt world beyond its protective walls, since the problems that assail the homes in their novels have, more often than not, germinated from within. The comings and goings of outside elements, in fact, usually only help expose the conflicts and secrets already contaminating these idealized spaces, thereby bringing the public and private spheres into contact with one another for, as Maxwell argues in regards to both Reynolds's and Dickens's novels, "the narrative progresses by a constant succession of revelations to the reader, the characters, or both, revelations which parallel and sometimes produce an exploration of the city" (198). So rather than imagining a one-way infiltration of the urban into the domestic, Reynolds and Dickens depict a London in which the influence of both spheres sets off chain reactions in the other. The city may, then, invade the impoverished garrets of female workers, carrying the problems of economic and sexual exploitation regularly confronted on the city streets into these interior spaces, while for the seemingly secure families within what should be model Victorian houses, the home incubates hidden secrets and shadowy past events that the agitation associated with the city eventually dislodges and brings to light.

The flimsy border between the intimacy of home and the threatening aspects of the city is embodied in the figure of the French *femme de chambre* – who simultaneously represents elite privilege and a dangerous foreignness in both novels – as she has access to the most privates spaces within the home but lacks the affective bonds that would connect her to the family inhabiting it. Like the nineteenth-century needlewoman, the lady's maid became a figure imbued with the ability to signify more than that which was implied by her mere labor, for according to critic Mariana Valverde, "while the starving

seamstresses of mid-Victorian literature had been portrayed as objects of pity and charity, the maids, factory women, and new clerical workers of the later Victorian urban world were commonly portrayed as sexual and moral dangers to the city."[35] Even by mid-century, the lady's maid was already considered a rather wily character: although her position in the house was one of servitude, she figures nevertheless as a powerful personage in the fictional depictions that analyze her as a type. Indeed, one can read the lady's maid as a counterpoint to the more prevalent images of seamstresses, as the latter was always a victim while the former more often a threat. The source of the lady's maid power was, of course, her proximity to dirty laundry, so to speak, which meant access to the family's secrets. In an 1845 article, "Punch's Guide to Servants: The Lady's Maid," inquisitive servants were advised, tongue in cheek, to make the most of their knowledge:

> In your position of lady's-maid, many family secrets will perhaps come to your knowledge. Do not talk of them to your fellow-servants, which would, in fact, be destroying your own valuable monopoly. A servant who knows a great deal of the family affairs cannot be cheaply parted with. You will be secure in your place, and will therefore be in a position to make the most of all its advantages.[36]

While the lady's maid did presumably know more about the family than the other servants in the household, hers was still a tenuous position. Subject to scolding, harassment, and accusations (of theft, laziness, vanity, etc.) as often as any other servant – and made additionally vulnerable by the intense supervision her close contact with the mistress's jewels and other finery warranted – the lady's maid was most likely only a threatening figure in the literary imagination.

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[35] Mariana Valverde, "The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse," *Victorian Studies* 32.2 (1989): 185.
[36] "Punch's Guide to Servants: The Lady's Maid," *Punch*, 9 (1845): 69.

The lady's maid as a demonized type can thus be read as a reflection of the fear or mistrust that Victorians felt vis-à-vis the servants occupying and, in some cases, even running their homes. Such wide-spread anxiety, however, indicates the extent to which nervous families had something to hide since, when discussing the numerous servants' manuals published during the nineteenth-century, critic Brian McCuskey argues that "… in warning servants what not to observe, the manuals acknowledge and articulate precisely the guilty secrets – alcoholism, illness, adultery, domestic violence – that middle-class households were so determined to suppress."[37] Neither Reynolds's Clementine nor Dickens's Hortense would be threatening figures in the British households they serve, in other words, if these households were blameless or actually conformed to the image of stately and unassailable respectability that they project to society at large. While Reynolds and Dickens acknowledge the danger and impropriety of these secrets, they nevertheless condemn their ambitious lady's maids and soundly punish these women for their attempts to expose and undermine the families for whom they work. Clementine and Hortense, furthermore, are unlike the humorous little spies depicted in *Punch* as they both engage in criminal activity in order to fulfill their ambitions. Stressing the foreignness (i.e. the Frenchness) of these *femmes de chambre* and their consequential otherness – which is expressed by bestial metaphors when Clementine is described as a "tiger-cat" (84) and Hortense "a very neat she-wolf imperfectly tamed" (156) – Reynolds and Dickens seem to argue that, while introducing outsiders into the intimate domestic sphere is necessarily risky, the degree of foreignness

[37] Brian W. McCuskey, "The Kitchen Police: Servant Surveillance and Middle-Class Transgression," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28.2 (2000): 360.

matters and that the native orphan with obscure family origins is a safer bet than the French woman of even the most transparent background.

From Lady's Maid to Lady: A Deadly Ambition

Clementine enters the narrative of Reynolds's novel as an elegant accessory – another element constituting the rich paraphernalia of a duchess's boudoir – signifying the refinement of both her mistress and her mistress's private space. An expected presence in an environment designed to be read as luxurious and decadent, the lady's maid is nevertheless crucial to the scene, as she supplies the third part in the triangular configuration that constitutes Virginia's first meeting with the duchess. Indeed, while it is difficult to argue that Reynolds was at all deliberate about it, one can read Clementine as Virginia's less virtuous, or less fortunate, double, as they are the two female workers intimately connected with this ill-fated ducal dynasty. Beyond such obvious similarities as their shared vulnerability and dependence on the goodwill of those more economically powerful than themselves, they both fall in love (inappropriately) with the duchess's aristocratic stepson, who should be far beyond both of them.[38] Unlike the naïve needlewoman, however, the French *femme de chambre* is in the know. Whereas Virginia is tossed around the city, seeking refuge and employment in a string of successive locales, Clementine intensifies her hold on her employers first by divining the secret of

[38] It cannot be forgotten, however, that this same man, Charles, was also Julia's lover. One man disputed among three women (who should never aspire to possess him in the first place) is more than just economy on Reynolds's part: because Julia and Clementine compete with Virginia for Charles's affection (which he clearly bestows upon the virtuous seamstress), all chance of solidarity and mutual support among working women is lost.

the duchess's love for a family friend Lavenham (who is Virginia's father) and the duke's reactionary attempt to murder his wife (for which Lavenham takes the blame) and, then, by discovering the nascent romance between Charles and Virginia. So while her initial appearance in the duchess's boudoir seems to conform to all the implications of servility inherent in her role as maid, she – unlike Virginia – constitutes a powerful working-class figure with the wherewithal to expose and exploit the weaknesses of the ruling class.

For all her power, however, Clementine remains yet another generic representative of her type until the duchess, injured under suspicious circumstances, is trusted to her watch and care. Entreated to observe the wounded woman, Clementine complies and is, in turn, subjected to narrative observation as an individual in her own right. At first she is merely described as a representative of a type, but she is quickly individualized as the focus turns to her superlative neatness:

> Clementine was clad in a warm wrapper; and a Parisian cap set off her dark hair and her interesting countenance, which had all the vivacity and archness of expression particular to the French *femme-de-chambre*. Even when alone or unobserved, there was a certain coquettish air about Mademoiselle Clementine which formed a part of her very nature; – and so accustomed was she to enhance her personal attractions by the elegant neatness and tasteful gentility of her attire, that she was not to be deterred from the observance of this habit by even the cares and duties associated with the sick-room. (55)

While there might be something incongruous about such gentility in a sickroom, readers are of course aware that this attempt at elegance is both "a part of her very nature" and rendered artificial through its expression in dress. She is not like Virginia, then, who is naturally (and without effort) noble in spite of her impoverished attire and surrounding squalor. Because she consciously adopts such apparel in order to "enhance her personal

attractions," Clementine projects her aesthetic preferences onto the otherwise unremarkable servant's attire, thereby challenging the notion of taste theorized by Pierre Bourdieu. Arguing that taste is shaped by class, Bourdieu maintains that it "functions as a sort of social orientation, a 'sense of one's place', guiding the occupants of a given place in social space towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices or goods which befit the occupants of that position."[39] Clementine, then, should be unable to rival her mistress in refinement, yet Reynolds insists that both women are shallow, substance-less, and far more similar than their social positions would seem to allow.

Clementine – and the lady's maid in general – is an ambiguous figure; meant to adorn the ducal boudoir, she is simultaneously supposed to be distinctly separate from it. Unlike Virginia, who through her physical similarity to her mother, can claim a sense of rightful belonging in the duchess's ballroom, the *femme de chambre* is only ever inappropriate when she dresses in such a way that visually confounds the social distinctions she would have been expected to observe.[40] The problem with Clementine, moreover, is that her ladylikeness is all surface with no real substance. Though she may look (howsoever inappropriately) genteel, she is exposed by language, as she prefers "speaking in her own native tongue when addressing her Grace, and in broken English when vouchsafing her remarks aside to Virginia" (11). Her imperfections of speech

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[39] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984) 466.

[40] While ladies' maids were notorious over-dressers who constantly tried to imitate the styles and luxuries worn by their mistresses, Clementine is described in such a way that never renders her ridiculous. One gets the impression that she actually looks like a lady, rather the parody of one. Moreover, even the duke comments upon her good taste – at the very moment it is breached as she confesses her interest in his son (76).

gesture to what the reader can probably already intuit: appearances aside, she is not the real deal. While the earlier description of Virginia's innate nobility has already prepared the reader to accept the fact that elevated spirits could, indeed, be trapped in servile bodies, Clementine seems to caution the overly-hasty against confounding a genteel demeanor with a true gentility.

A Victorian audience could have overlooked her appropriated dress code, but it would have bristled against her more offensive ambition, which is revealed after she overhears the wounded and delirious duchess reveal damaging secrets. Wishing to make the audacious leap from boudoir to ballroom, she informs the duke that unless he forces her son Charles, the Marquis of Arden, to marry her, she will bring down his corrupted house. With the wolves (or sheriff's officers sent for the non-payment of debt) literally at his door, the duke learns that the most real danger to his dynasty lies not without but within, in the figure of a trusted servant who knows (and wants) too much. This ambition would have been abhorrent (though also rather expected) to a Victorian audience, but Reynolds softens, if not excuses, it by maintaining that she has, in fact, fallen in love with Charles. Although her love, unlike Virginia's, is not reciprocated, one still must wonder why the one is condemned while the other encouraged. The difference, of course, lies in Virginia's acute awareness of her station vis-à-vis the marquis (who never actually reveals his title to her) and, far from wanting him to "lower" himself by marrying her, she does not even allow him to carry her telltale hat-box through the streets of London (46). Virginia, moreover, is not really Charles's social inferior, which explains, perhaps, why he suddenly finds himself willing to marry a working-girl when he had already been

accustomed to taking them on as mistresses. When Charles and Virginia fall in love, they are unconsciously obeying the tastes dictated by their social class, whereas Clementine is, once more, completely inappropriate – overreaching herself in her choice of men, just as she had in dress.

If, as Clementine makes apparent, secrets are insecure even in the most private of homes, they are even less so in the city at large; and if the duchess's personal life is exposed in her sick room, her daughter's (equally sensitive, though less scandalous) love life is jeopardized, and eventually thwarted, through discovery and public disapproval. Throughout her brief romance with Charles, Virginia is better housed, fed, and dressed than at any other point in the novel, and, while protesting delicately, she does accept her fiancé's money in order to be so. Although she never sleeps with Charles in exchange for money, it is nevertheless true that she – like Julia – gains by her relationship with him. In order to set herself apart from her lover's ex-mistress, however, Virginia never discloses her address to Charles, denying him access to her that was a necessary component of his relationship with the other woman. Only ever meeting Charles in parks and on city streets, Virginia may protect herself from the hint of impurity, but she also exposes them to watchful eyes adept at ferreting out secrets that would be better concealed in private spaces. Witnessed first by Julia and then by Clementine, the couple is discovered by jealous women who, ultimately, have stronger claims on the wandering aristocrat. When she sees Charles and Virginia walking arm-in-arm on Regent Street, Clementine tells the duke that his son is on the verge of shaming the family by making an inappropriate match and plots with him to break them up. As co-conspirators, the lady's maid and the duke

illustrate the fact that, according to McCuskey, "far from violating bourgeois norms of privacy and order, the activity of servants in the home reveals those norms to be much more complex and ambivalent than the official separation of private and public spheres seems to indicate" (361). Not only a dangerous outsider in the home, Clementine makes herself indispensible by understanding what is going on in both private and public spaces.

As the narrative progresses, concealed crimes and inappropriate affairs are revealed and Clementine learns the dangers of knowing too much. When he finally consents to the *femme de chambre*'s marriage with his son, the duke advises Clementine to steal his daughter's dress and his wife's jewels in order to be properly attired for her elopement. Although usually not so naïve, the lady's maid believes that she is being appropriately dressed like a lady, though readers quickly realize that the duke intends for her to appear in the guise of a thief. In a grotesque imitation of Virginia and Charles trysts in Regent's Park, the duke sends Clementine to Hyde Park – supposedly to meet Charles in order to run away with him – and into the arms of the assassin he hired to kill her. When her murdered body is found alongside an empty jewelry case by police the next day, she is written off as a betrayed co-conspirator and no more thought is given to the dead *femme de chambre* throughout the remainder of the novel. Though the body count mounts as the narrative wanes – the duke kills himself, Virginia succumbs to consumption, the duchess expires in guilt over her daughter's abandonment, and Charles is killed in a duel – Clementine is the one who is punished, not so much for what she did, but, rather, for what she knows. Indeed, one could argue that, like Virginia's, her death is narratively predictable as neither woman is truly a match for the city and its various

social and economic codes dictating the place of working women. Having rejected their fates – which would have condemned them to a life of service in either a boudoir or a brothel – the lady's maid and needlewoman discover that, for those who do not easily fit into their preordained spaces, life in the city is impossible.

The Lady's Maid as the Lady's Double: An Urban Masquerade

In *Bleak House*, a novel full of content and respectable working women, Mademoiselle Hortense, Lady Dedlock's French *femme de chambre*, is a notable exception. Unlike Charley and Guster, who patiently endure the tyranny of their female employers, or Caddy, who is clearly exploited by her mother, Hortense has an enviable position with an undemanding mistress but, in contrast with the other women, she finds her employer-employee relationship unsatisfying. Indeed, eclipsed in her employer's affections by another (younger and prettier) maid, she is not even introduced into the narrative until Lady Dedlock's attraction towards, and preference for, Rosa has been well established, thereby leaving Hortense in the role of a rejected and jealous woman. Echoing Reynolds by depicting discord – rather than friendship and solidarity – among working women, Dickens complicates Lady Dedlock's relationships with her servants by portraying Hortense as the professional lady's maid and Rosa as a local village girl just whiling away her time before she eventually marries. By favoring the latter, then, Lady Dedlock rejects the maid who forms the perfect image of the type in preference for the one whose career is temporary and formed by affective, rather than professional, ties. Moreover, because she is Mrs. Rouncewell's handpicked protégée and eventual grand-

daughter-in-law, Rosa is more comfortable with, and comforting to, the various members of the household than the foreign-born *femme de chambre* whose status within the family never transcends that of a worker.[41]

While Hortense notices her mistress's admiration for Rosa's beauty, she never questions whether or not this preference can be traced to her own status as a foreigner within this staunchly British household. Indeed, unlike Rosa who is a known entity, Hortense's precise origins are unclear as she is "from somewhere in the Southern country about Avignon and Marseilles," thereby lending her both an air of foreignness and inscrutability (156). While her background is ambiguous, her appearance is not as she cannot, in fact, be separated from her minutely described physicality. While other female characters are described more obliquely – and usually, quite simply, as beautiful or not – Hortense is endowed with a physical presence at once handsome, bestial, and monstrous.[42] Othered, then, not only for her nationality, but also, and more importantly, for her deviant performance of gender (both on the level of the body and in her speech and actions), the *femme de chambre* could be read as yet another Dickensian harpy – in the manner of *Little Dorrit*'s Miss Wade or *David Copperfield*'s Miss Dartle – but for the striking fact that all of her anger is directed toward her female employer and not a man who wronged her. Viewing Hortense's anger as intrinsically linked to her status as a

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[41] Throughout the novel, Lady Dedlock addresses Rosa as "child" – most strikingly right after meeting Esther in Lincolnshire. Although it would be a stretch to argue that Rosa is viewed as a substitute for her lost daughter, this affectionate form of address gestures to the decidedly unprofessional view of Rosa held by Lady Dedlock.

[42] Critics have long noted the absence of female bodies in Dickens's novels. If Hortense's body can be described because it is demonically othered, other bodies, according to critic Helena Michie, "occupy the place of the unrepresented, the unspeakable." Helena Michie, "'Who is this in Pain?': Scarring, Disfigurement, and Female Identity in *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 22.2 (1989): 199.

worker, critic Olga Stuchebruknov argues that "in *Bleak House*, Hortense is a mouth-piece of the underclass discontent and, as such, embodies the horrors of the revolution, which have been traditionally associated by the British middle classes with the lower passions and the lack of self-restraint."[43] Because Hortense – Dickens's angry female worker – is French, however, she displaces any fear about indigenous working-class resentment in a novel that attempts to excite sympathy for the disadvantaged poor.

Hortense would be an interesting enough character for the intensity of her anger toward her employer alone, but when she and Lady Dedlock are doubled through a mutual appropriation of dress, her role in the narrative is further complicated. Disguising herself as a maid when searching for her dead lover's grave, Lady Dedlock dresses, if not in Hortense's actual clothing, in something more appropriate to the other woman's status. Her disguise, of course, deceives no one, as her attire and the body it adorns are inconsistent: "she should be an upper servant by her attire, yet, in her air and step … she is a lady. Her face is veiled, and still she sufficiently betrays herself to make more than one of those who pass her look round sharply" (220). Dickens here echoes the notion endorsed by Eugène Sue: the body of a sexually deviant woman cannot stay hidden, rendering any disguise or transformation through clothing inadequate. Because her class status, in conjunction with her sexual crime, leaves her unable to cross the city unobserved, she is forced to adopt the apparel of working women who, for all their disadvantages, are free to move about the metropolis. Aware that her every movement is watched – first by the fashionable intelligence, then by Tulkinghorn (the cagey family

[43] Olga Stuchebruknov, "*Bleak House* as an Allegory of a Middle-Class Nation," *Dickens Quarterly* XXII/3 (2006): 158.

lawyer), and finally by Inspector Bucket – Lady Dedlock descends the social ladder even further when, at the end of the novel, she trades dresses with Jenny, the brickmaker's wife, in order to return, unhindered, to her lover's grave. In a novel that continuously depicts the city as a space conducive to near-impossible encounters, these women from opposite ends of the social hierarchy are united through dress, for according to critic Sambudha Sen, "Lady Dedlock's frequent disguises split her body in a way that would never be possible in the more realistic modes of characterization: they prod the reader into seeing Lady Dedlock as *both* servant and lady, *both* lady and brickmaker's wife."[44] While readers would never actually confound these various women, Lady Dedlock's disguises force one to wonder if social status is ever all that fixed. Making the trajectory from her aristocratic mansion to a pauper's grave, Lady Dedlock accepts the loss of self that her loss of position entails and her multiple costumes can be read, not only as disguises, but also as an attempt to *be* the woman whose love lies moldering in a common grave.

When Hortense, in turn, imitates the clothing worn by Lady Dedlock, she is of course going against all stereotypes of the vain lady's maid who apes her mistress by ridiculously dressing above her station. In fact, her disguise is not really a disguise at all as she is merely dressing as Lady Dedlock's version of herself. Although a model lady's maid, Hortense cannot pull off the disguise for, as Jo maintains, "it is her and it an't her. It an't her hand, nor yet her rings, nor yet her woice. But that there's the wale, the bonnet, and the gownd, and they're wore the same way wot she wore 'em, and it's her height wot

[44] Sambudha Sen, "*Bleak House*, *Vanity Fair*, and the Making of an Urban Aesthetic," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 54.4 (2000): 501.

she wos, and she giv me a sov'ring and hooked it" (312). Like Lady Dedlock, the *femme de chambre* is given away by a body that cannot conform to the aristocratic standard set by the other woman. Uneducated and illiterate, Jo finds that it is not only text he cannot read, as he is unable to keep all the similarly attired women straight either. Meeting Esther (who, naturally, resembles her mother), he wonders "if she [Esther] ain't the t'other one, she ain't the forrenner. Is there *three* of 'em then?" (425). This proliferation of women who look like – but also unlike – one another confounds the ignorant street-sweep but informs the reader that, although appearances can be tricky, in Dickens's world they are inherently trust-worthy since all disguised women are eventually unmasked.

While Lady Dedlock's motivation for disguising herself is obvious – as she only wants to be near the man she once loved – Hortense's is less so. She adopts her Lady-Dedlock-as-maid costume twice: once at Tulkinghorn's request – since she thinks that, by helping him, he will find her a new lady's maid position – and again in order to murder him, believing that Lady Dedlock would be recognized and accused – thereby allowing her to get back at the two people who hindered her in her chosen occupation. Both attempts at disguise, then, are orchestrated to help her professionally. While Hortense is typically viewed as an irrational foreigner, it becomes clear that her actions are rather extreme manifestations of professional insecurity, as the only thing the *femme de chambre* ever seems to want throughout the novel is a secure position with a mistress who needs her.[45] Lady Dedlock, by preferring to have Rosa wait upon her, renders

[45] She even, in a rather unexpected scene, implores Esther to employ her.

Hortense dispensable and, when Tulkinghorn reneges on his promise of placing her in a suitable position, she is left with the uncomfortable status (or even non-identity) of a worker deprived of her work. As a woman whose identity is so closely wrapped up with her role as a worker, she is naturally viewed as somewhat suspect, and certainly irrational, in the eyes of Dickens and his Victorian readership.

A victim of her employer's whims, Hortense (like Reynolds's Clementine) guesses enough about her mistress's past and present "crimes" to be able to threaten the proud lady. By ferreting out secrets that could damage the social order, one wonders how transgressive servants' acts of spying really are for, according to McCuskey, "from this point of view, the effect of servant surveillance is normative rather than subversive, facilitating the restoration of law and order in the community" (362). It is important to note, however, that Hortense – again, like Clementine – never reveals these secrets to the proper parties but, rather, engages in criminal behavior herself so that, in the end, all moral dubiousness falls upon the French *femme de chambre*. Given the propensity towards deceit and hypocrisy in the aristocratic circle she serves, however, one wonders if – through such promiscuous mixing of high and low social spheres – she has only been contaminated by their obviously bad example. Ultimately, however, each group proves dangerous to the other as the deviances of one motivate the crimes of the other, creating a space where only deception, doubt, and disguise could flourish.

London and the Working Women's City

Any great, labyrinthine city is necessarily a space of both contact and separation as it fosters communication between strangers from all walks of life while simultaneously throwing great distances or opaque barriers between those who would attempt to find one another. Viewing the metropolis as a site where class, rather than geography, maintains and enforces social separations, critic Jeremy Tambling argues that "actual spaces, in London, indicate an interconnectedness which is denied by the class-bound and socially constructed lives of people, which produce for each their own social space and limits of privacy."[46] While this assertion may have increasing validity in the twenty-first century, both Reynolds and Dickens saw the city as a space where people were thrown – for better or for worse – into discomfiting levels of contact with one another, regardless of background, social status, or class affiliation. Victorian attitudes towards this aspect of urban life are ambivalent, and even after reading Reynolds's and Dickens's novels it is not entirely clear if they celebrate or worry about these inevitable encounters. As he links *Bleak House*'s most noble personage, Lady Dedlock, with Jo, its lowest, Dickens ponders: "what connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together!" (217). Their connection, of course, is the city: a shared space, it shaped its diverse residents – from the highest to the lowest – just as it was, in turn, shaped by them.

More than any other prominent figure of the Victorian era, London's working women blurred the distinctions drawn between the various social sectors, as homes across

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[46] Jeremy Tambling, *Going Astray: Dickens and London* (London: Pearson, 2009) 153.

the metropolis were run by an army of domestics, who raised the children, prepared the meals, and clothed the families of the middle and upper classes. These women obfuscated the split between public and private spheres since – though they were central to the functioning of these domestic interiors – they were both members of *and* outsiders within the homes in which they lived and labored. Undoubtedly conscious of such an uncomfortable contradiction, Dickens created the character of Esther Summerson, in part, to resolve this tension (caused by the intrusion of the public into the private) by showing how the homeless orphan is at home everywhere, privatizing space through her very presence. As reminders of the outside world admitted to the most intimate spaces of the home, working women – such as servants, governesses, seamstresses, and laundresses – were also, though perhaps in the imagination more than in reality, seen as social shape shifters. Since, as women, they were powerless, they tended lose status quickly when subjected to financial ruin (like Reynolds's Virginia Mordaunt), but they could always marry well and shed their status as workers (like Esther). These are, of course, romantic views of working women – a sign, perhaps, that Reynolds and Dickens could not fully conceptualize the workers behind the women who were nevertheless barometers of their financially and socially unstable times.

PART 3: *THE NEW VISION OF THE CITY*

Chapter 5: Symbolical Works: Inscribing Women onto the Urban Fabric in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*

"I believe that, at present, women are the best helpers of one another."
—Margaret Fuller[1]

Before a dress was waltzed across a ballroom floor, it took shape under a seamstress's needle. Mapping the creation of clothing across London, Victorian print culture repeatedly illustrated a dress's ability to connect high and low sectors of the city: sewn in the unsanitary, cramped garrets where seamstresses lodged, the finished product embellished wealthy women in glamorous salons, ballrooms, and boudoirs. A dress's journey from one environment to another evokes a compelling mental image, and the wide gulf splitting the separate spheres is an enticing terrain to traverse mentally as one tries to imagine possible forms of direct contact across this great divide. If the distance, in other words, between a garret and ballroom signified the social and economic disparity between women throughout the nineteenth century, a dress embodied the fragile thread connecting them. Turning away from the urban labyrinth – with its unstable system of social and professional networks – that is analyzed in previous chapters, this final chapter explores the city as a site of encounter and connections. As a utopian vision of the city emerges from the pages of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1856 verse-novel *Aurora Leigh*,

[1] Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* 1845 (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1999) 94.

it becomes clear that – unlike the panoramic or mysterious cities already investigated – this newly imagined site is not one composed of disparate types with prescribed roles in the city but, rather, one built by workers who have joined together to carve out a new space where people can circulate freely, regardless of type or social position.

Throughout the verse-novel, sewing is used as a metaphor to describe both women's work and the place of women in Victorian society even though Barrett Browning's female poet adamantly rejects the feminine milieu of domestic craft and fashionable consumption. Trading her needle for a pen, the eponymous heroine nevertheless finds herself situated in a network of socially diverse women who are connected by metaphors – and acts – of sewing. As a producer of texts, Aurora initially distances herself from the feminine world of textiles – which she identifies with a certain type of frivolous and unproductive woman – in order to consecrate herself to both her art and more lucrative professional prose. Retreating to her ivory tower (urban third story walk-up) to write poems, she nevertheless finds herself bound to both the feminized world of fashion and sewing and the sordid realities of nineteenth-century London when work, love, and social activism all collide in the figure of the quintessential Victorian seamstress, Marian Erle. Reading this text as a subtle valorization of women's work, I argue that Barrett Browning grounds her poem in everyday life (represented here by the urban poor) in order to rewrite space and explode the utopias of nineteenth-century reformers to encompass a balance between men and women, rich and poor, art and philanthropy.

As a poet, Aurora is an exceptional kind of working woman and therefore does not fall into a predetermined category (or a designated space) upon London's panorama. Indeed, she fights throughout the text against the expectations that others would impose upon her as she struggles to define for herself what it means to be a visionary poet, self-sufficient writer, and woman. Her interactions with Marian Erle – the poem's other working woman – reveal, however, the extent to which she does not grant this same freedom to others. As a working-class seamstress, Marian is, in other words, always already knowable. Barrett Browning's readers would, of course, have thought so and would therefore not have been surprised when Aurora attributes actions and motivations to the girl without first trying to verify them through any form of communication more thorough than sight alone.[2] Aurora's inability to see Marian as anything more than a type is, however, both an interpersonal *and* poetic problem since she cannot successfully write about the city and its citizens if she is unable to see them for what and who they are. While Aurora's perceptions of Marian as a type cause her to judge and condemn the working girl, Marian speaks against Aurora's stilted vision and, by showing her how to look beyond stereotypes, she supplies the poet with a new model of vision to be applied to both art and life. Looking at how the clichéd figure of the seamstress challenges Aurora's conflation of seeing and knowing, this chapter explores the ways in which the verse novel rewrites the working woman as an urban type.

As a *Kunstlerroman* that qualifies the desire to create great art with the need to make money, the poem rehearses a familiar plot wherein the young protagonist is

[2] I discuss in greater detail below the way in which the Victorian seamstress was an emblematic figure that automatically signified certain things to a contemporary public.

suddenly left alone in the world and goes to London to earn a living. Barrett Browning modifies this standard story, however, when her upper-class heroine chooses work over marriage and then confronts a working-class double (the typified sempstress) who must similarly survive on her own in the city. Looking at the role that other women play in the text, I wish to consider how Marian and Lady Waldemar (a conniving socialite) influence Aurora as she learns to negotiate the restrictive gendered space of womanly work.[3] Aurora's evolution from city-writer to city-maker occurs, I argue, in the nexus of these homosocial bonds that – to echo Barrett Browning's crafty metaphors – compose a tapestry that, when looked at from the wrong side, seems to be comprised of a web of competing women in an environment of male scarcity, but, if turned to the right side, shows the extent to which female *becoming* is a process that depends on a recognition of one's own position among other women. If I insist on using metaphors of sewing and other "woman's work" to talk about this verse-novel, it is because I believe that Barrett Browning has woven them into her text in order to show how we are to read this poem. Looking at sewing as an act of inscription, Helena Michie sees stitches as signs of the self: "the seams into which Victorian heroines channel their desire become seams or scars in the text; while leisure-class sewers try to make both bodies and stitches invisible, seams, however dainty, mark the tissue of the novel and produce a trace of the heroine's

[3] By "womanly work" I mean both the work for which women (such as Marian) were paid but also the traditionally feminine crafts (such as cross-stitch, embroidery, and modeling wax flowers) that Aurora's aunt deemed appropriate for young girls. Acknowledging that the difference between what can be considered a *craft* versus an *art* is a rather contentious issue, I will nevertheless use these two terms to talk about women's handicrafts since, as I argue below, such works can be read as opportunities for artistic expression.

physical presence."[4] In *Aurora Leigh*, this trace not only marks the paths of the woman's body through the text but also, as I will show, through the nineteenth-century city and its social, economic, and artistic circles.

Arachnology: Writing Women as Workers and Wives

If the female body is made visible by the act of sewing, it is initially a maimed, unnatural figure that emerges from the seams of this text. Indeed, as the imagery of sewing produces a textual form of embodiment, it does so most notably through the ways in which it violates the woman's body. Commenting upon her largely irrelevant (but apparently dangerous) "feminine" education, Aurora accuses her guardian aunt of wielding her domestic accomplishments violently, maintaining that the older woman attempted "to prick me to a pattern with her pin."[5] The end result of a woman's craft – in terms of both the producer and her product – is a slew of unnatural, or deformed, women. Aurora makes this double-edged feminine maiming obvious when, forced to learn how to cross-stitch, she creates a shepherdess afflicted with fashionable blindness as she "lean[s] lovelorn with pink eyes / To match her shoes, when I mistook the silks" (1.451-452). Conflating the seamstress with the shepherdess, Aurora then goes on to lament the extent to which attention to such detail-orientated tasks dull the crafter's sight as well, making sewing an act which narrows the vision of both the creator and her creation, whose eyes have been reduced to mere accessories. What Aurora fails to see, of course, is the way in

[4] Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 42.
[5] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1995) 1.381.

which even this "inferior" skill can express the higher truths that she believes to be consecrated to the domain of poetry. That is to say that, while Aurora considers these handicrafts to be mindless busy-work, they can – like poetry – be viewed as tangible expressions of an artist's sense of self and place. Reading the textile as text, I maintain that Barrett Browning undermines her own dismissal of women's work by showing the extent to which typically silenced women manage to speak through it – so that Aurora's blinded shepherdess articulates her rejection of both the forced attention to such work and the antiquated notions of gender it enforces. According to critic Nancy K. Miller, post-structuralist thought has lost sight of the creator in its obsession with the creation. Defining the notion of Arachnology as "a critical positioning which reads *against* the weave of indifferentiation to discover the embodiment in writing of a gendered subjectivity; to recover within representation the emblems of its construction," Miller advocates making room for the restoration of spiders, lace makers, and poets, who have all been overshadowed by their webs, lace, and poems.[6] I propose a reading of *Aurora Leigh* that takes this notion of Arachnology into account by looking at how the products of female labor (be it a poem or a pair of slippers) articulate a woman's relation to her work and to herself as a worker.

While this chapter focuses on the texts and textiles embedded within the larger verse-novel, I wish to pause briefly over the visible imprint of the female poet – in this case, Barrett Browning – and her conscious decision to frame her argument about the importance of woman's work within an epic (and therefore traditionally masculine)

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[6] Nancy K. Miller, "Arachnologies: The Woman, The Text, and the Critic," *The Poetics of Gender*, Ed. Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 272.

genre.[7] Her use of a form closely associated with the narratives of myth or national origins seems unexpected, moreover, given her commitment to tackling the "real" (embodied by nineteenth-century London's social problems) of her own time and place.[8] Her poetic objective is articulated by Aurora who, when musing upon her own poetic inadequacies, claims that the real goal of poetry is to acknowledge the historical importance of one's actual age and to immortalize it in print, rather than create fanciful images of past eras and the deeds of dead heroes:

> if there's room for poets in the world
> A little overgrown, (I think there is),
> Their sole work is to represent the age,
> Their age, not Charlemagne's. (5.199-202)

Elevating the slum-courtyards and elegant ballrooms of London by making them modern subjects of epic poetry, Barrett Browning depicts a new setting for her very new type of hero: the woman writer who lives independently in the city. Indeed, Barrett Browning's depiction of the poet is decidedly modern in that it addresses both Aurora's mastery of her art and the practical steps she must take in order to earn money. These two facets of Aurora's craft are not separate however. That is to say that it cannot be too great a coincidence that Aurora's most creative period is during her time spent in London when she is forced to balance her dedication to her artistic oeuvre with the financial imperative to work. This attention to the concrete realities of a money economy might represent a

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[7] See Marjorie Stone for a discussion of how Barrett Browning's subversion of genre reflects a similar subversion of gender. Marjorie Stone, "Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion: 'The Princess' and 'Aurora Leigh,'" *Victorian Poetry* 25.2 (1987): 103.

[8] Barrett Browning's realist vision differs significantly from what one normally associates with nineteenth-century realism. Turning away from the copious *thinginess* that stands in for the real in other novels, Barrett Browning looks to that which is unpoetic – prostitutes and other poor figures filling a squalid courtyard in London's slums, for instance – to signal her commitment to (and valorization of) the real.

break from the traditional epic but it grounds the poem in the realism of city life. While Barrett Browning's view of poets as necessary spiritual uplifters in a time of brute materialism is doubtless a romantic ideal, her descriptions of Aurora nevertheless reveal a realistic negotiation city life for, as Peter Brooks argues, "realism is nothing if not urban: it is most characteristically about the city in some important way, as the new total context of modern life."[9] With her intent to detect and depict the epic-worthy aspects of her own time and place, Barrett Browning trades the Elysian Fields of poetry for the ugly (London's slums) and corrupt (Parisian brothels) scenes of modern life before offering up her poetic vision of a utopian city at the end of the text.

As an urban poet who writes of the city, Aurora must also negotiate the largely masculine arena of popular print culture.[10] She learns, moreover, that gender does matter in one's choice of genre, as her most commercially successful pieces are also the most compromising:

> In England, no one lives by verse that lives;
> And, apprehending, I resolved by prose
> To make a space to sphere my living verse.
> I wrote for cyclopaedias, magazines,
> And weekly papers, holding up my name
> To keep it from the mud. (3.307-312)

While anonymity cloaks her gender, lending her prose articles a sense of neutrality they would presumably lack if they were openly female-authored, the metaphor of her name

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[9] Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2005) 131.

[10] The subject matter of Aurora's verse is, of course, purely speculative. I infer, however, that she takes on urban themes and concerns due to her commitment to seeking the poetic aspects of her own milieu. Stating that Regent Street is to nineteenth-century British poets what Camelot was to King Arthur's contemporaries, Aurora would presumably use an equivalent of this fashionable West End shopping district – if not the actual street itself – as inspiration within her poetic oeuvre (5.209-212).

(held up – like the hem of a dress – from the urban mire) renders the very act of anonymous publication a feminine gesture. Her gendered signature, then, is paradoxically inscribed upon these circulating prose pieces through her refusal to sign her name on them. Aurora's scruples that protect her ladylike respectability are, of course, a mark of her class privilege for, although she is constrained to sell prose in the literary marketplace in order to maintain her standard of living at home, she is not a worker as the term was used during the nineteenth-century.[11] While critics, such as Anne Wallace, have argued that these seemingly conflicted attitudes about the respectability of remunerative labor renders *Aurora Leigh* as a whole ambivalent about the issues of women's work and writing, I read Aurora's somewhat prudish reaction to profitable prose as an issue of supply and demand (as the poet must write what sells) rather than a problem of accepting money for her work.[12] Indeed, the text supports a valorization of women's work throughout, as unproductive women necessarily fall "below the dignity of man, / Accepting serfdom," implying that those who do not work for themselves must be enslaved to others (8: 712-715). Work, then, is the equalizer between the classes and sexes since – like anonymous publication – it erases the trappings of one's social identity and creates a space in which men and women can freely circulate.

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[11] Aurora emphasizes her relative poverty throughout the verse-novel, but it is a respectable, comfortable, even genteel form of economic privation. She has, for example, a servant with her in her poet's garret and if such feminine domestic duties as sewing and crafting are viewed as inauthentic distractions that wile away a woman's time while cluttering up her space, the heavier – and arguably more necessary – tasks of domestic life (cooking, cleaning, etc) are entirely disregarded. As for her status as a "worker," the term was used (as it still is) to describe lower-class manual laborers and is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "one who is employed for a wage, esp. in manual or industrial work."

[12] Anne D. Wallace, "'Nor in Fading Silks Compose': Sewing, Walking, and Poetic Labor in *Aurora Leigh*," *ELH* 64.1 (1997) 224. The commercialization of art and literature was not, moreover, only a problem for women. Male writers were also forced to negotiate the imperative to create literature with the imperative to be able to sell it by pandering to public taste.

If Aurora finds that visibility in the literary marketplace compromises her respectability, she is nevertheless exposed to a consuming public by choice. Offered financial security and social stability through marriage, she shuns a life defined by domestic duty in order to pursue a career in the city. Unlike Eugène Sue, Charles Dickens, and G. W. M. Reynolds, whose female workers only bide time until they can become wives, Barrett Browning argues that women cannot make successful marriages until they have first developed and nurtured a healthy attitude toward work. Indeed, rather than viewing independent, self-supporting women as a threat to the institution of marriage, Barrett Browning and her generation of feminists believed that these workers made ideal wives.[13] Work was, of course, a glamorous option for these women without the taint associated with the low paying, service-sector jobs performed by those of the lower class. Indeed, Aurora couches her refusal to Romney's marriage proposal in terms of the degrading work he would compel her to do, as he would have "My right hand teaching in the Ragged Schools, / My left hand washing in the Public Baths" (2.794-795). While it is tempting to interpret Aurora's refusal as a sign of her contempt vis-à-vis manual labor, the text supports a more generous reading. Because the ragged schools and public baths are Romney's projects, they would subsume the working wife and place her at the same level as the recipients of her husband's charity. By choosing not to be a wife,

[13] See for example Margaret Fuller, who in 1845 wrote that "I have urged on women independence of man, not that I do not think the sexes mutually needed by one another, but because in woman this fact has led to an excessive devotion, which has cooled love, degraded marriage, and prevented either sex from being what it should be to itself or the other" (96). This defense of Barrett Browning's view of marriage is worth stating because numerous critics have found fault with the poem ending with a proposed marriage between Aurora and Romney, seeing it as revision of Aurora's more radical views on women and work.

Aurora elects to undertake her own professional interests that will allow her to leave her mark upon the Victorian city.

Turning down Romney's proffered vocation in order to pursue a higher poetic calling, Aurora clearly approaches the issue of work from a position of privilege and, until her life becomes entwined with the working-class seamstress Marian Erle, she inhabits the male-centric world of the nineteenth-century artist. Indeed, Aurora can only ever be viewed as an ambiguous proto-feminist since she rejects all female role models in order to follow a path staked out by men.[14] Rather than insist upon the poet's hostility toward other women, however, I read Aurora's often-cited invective against homemaking as a critique of the "angel in the house" role that Victorian wives were expected to play rather than a diatribe against the housewife and her handicrafts:

> The works of women are symbolical.
> We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,
> Producing what? A pair of slippers, sir,
> To put on when you are weary – or a stool
> To stumble over and vex you … 'curse that stool!'
> Or else at best, a cushion, where you lean
> And sleep, and dream of something we are not,
> But would be for your sake. Alas, alas!
> This hurts most, this … that, after all, we are paid
> The worth of our work, perhaps. (1: 457-65)

Arguing that leisure-class women work only to please men, Aurora sees subjugation rather than self-expression in these handmade items. Their worthlessness, moreover, is due to a female misunderstanding of masculine desires: as women try to shape

[14] The consequences of Aurora's initial lack of female influence (due to her mother's early death) and subsequent rejection of her aunt's tutelage are largely unrecognized or unexamined by the poet. In spite of the difficulties she faces when forging her own path, she is surprisingly dismissive of Kate Ward's attempts to emulate her. Because Kate copies Aurora's dress, her attempts at self-fashioning come across as superficial but she is in fact the urban opposite of Aurora's despised angels in the house.

themselves into ideal wives in the same way that they painstakingly sew up slippers or cushions, they unknowingly pattern themselves after the wrong kind of woman. While the weight of critical attention tends to fall on Aurora's condemnation of female handicrafts, I think we can see it less as a problem of women's work and more as an issue of women's mobility.[15] The handcrafted objects specifically targeted – slippers, cushions, a stool – are objects to be worn in or adorn the home. They circulate, in other words, within a circumscribed space inside the middle or upper-class home and are thus outside the public exchange of goods, ideas, and artistic expression. If we view Aurora's dismissal of sewing in such a light, moreover, we have an easier time reconciling this negativity vis-à-vis woman's labor with the poem's valorization of women who sew for a living and whose work is therefore consumed within a larger arena. Viewing the symbolical works of women as instruments of containment, Aurora escapes from these threads that would bind her to the home and a limited role within it.

The Poet's City, or the City as Poetry

Aurora's move to London upon her aunt's death is a moment of transformation as she embarks upon her career and enters into a visible position of literary fame.[16] Writing for a broad audience, the poet's art circulates throughout the city, thereby thrusting her –

[15] Critics have read Aurora's dismissal of sewing as a rejection of "female" labor in favor of the "masculine" mental labor of poetry. While the text does, in fact, support this idea to some extent, I maintain that the work she condemns is merely a metonym for the "angel in the house" role that she so vehemently refuses. See Wallace for a more in-depth look at the critical response to Aurora's complex reaction to the domestic arts.

[16] The relationship between this Victorian poet and her public illustrates the extent to which, in Barrett Browning's mind, art is not separate from the wider world. It exists to be consumed by others and Barrett Browning makes this exchange (between the poet and her public) visible in the letters, requests, and visits Aurora receives in her role as a poet.

howsoever unwillingly – in the public eye. In spite of her professed productivity, Aurora finds the city distracting and marked by a pace that is not conducive to her literary pursuits, as she feels "overtasked and overstrained / And overlived in this close London life!" (3.39-40). It is telling, however, that when Aurora is first described in London, she is not being stifled by crowds of people in an outdoor space but, rather, she is overwhelmed in her own apartment by the letters from a demanding public. Unlike the solitude and anonymity that kept her separate from the wider world while on her aunt's estate, then, Aurora experiences London as a space of constant bombardment, as she is literally hounded by fans and critics even within the private space of her home and at all hours of the night. That this hounding is of a textual nature only underlines the fact that she inhabits a city shaped by poetry. Indeed, her experience of London is clearly atypical, and some critics, such as Daniel Karlin, question the extent of her experience of urban life: "A picture begins to emerge of Aurora's life in London as a double existence, one which takes advantage of urban culture and economic conditions, but which is not in fact committed to urban identity."[17] Indeed, if London were the only city visited by Aurora in the poem, this refusal to embrace an urban existence would undoubtedly be true. When Aurora is described moving about London, she is either running away (when surrounded by the menacing poor in Marian's lower-class courtyard) or fainting (at the church when she is, again, pressed by the angry poor there to witness the marriage between Romney

[17] Daniel Karlin, "Victorian Poetry of the City: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*," *Babylon or New Jerusalem: Perceptions of the City in Literature*, Ed. Valeria Tinkler-Villani (New York: Rodopi, 2005) 116.

and the seamstress). Aurora is, nevertheless, a city poet, a fact made clear by her walking meditations through the crowds and busy street scenes of Paris and Florence.

Although we only see Aurora moving from one interior space to another while in London (with the exception of her fainting spell in Saint James church), she argues that one can still experience the city while remaining physically apart from (or above) it. Maintaining that "your city poets see such things," she makes a case for her ability to sing the city from an aloof and removed position (3.186). Like the pestering letters that stand in for the pressing crowds overwhelming the poet, newspapers and other written accounts likely kept her informed and up to date vis-à-vis the city in which she lived for, according to Deirdre David, Barrett Browning's knowledge of London life was textual rather than experienced: "as an avid reader of virtually every kind of Victorian text, she was no stranger to representation of working-class suffering, and this, of course, is really the point—those faces 'festering to despairs' come from her extensive reading."[18] Aurora, who claims to be writing poetry that celebrates her modern time and place, must likewise be experiencing the city through this mediation of newspapers, government reports, and contemporary novels. Indeed, she finds that when she does actually step onto urban street space, she is exposed to the dangers from which women of her class are typically shielded. When, for instance, Aurora seeks out Marian Erle in order to embrace

[18] Deirdre David, "'Art's a Service: Social Wound, Sexual Politics, and *Aurora Leigh*," *Browning Institutes Studies: An Annual of Victorian Literature and Cultural History*, 13 (New York: Browning Institute, 1985) 127. While I wish to resist conflating Barrett Browning and Aurora, I think that it is, at times, unavoidable to see how they share a common poetic formation. As urban writers, both poets (fictional and factual) experience limitations vis-à-vis their access to London. While Barrett Browning was largely house-bound due to poor health, Aurora's class and gender bar her from some forms of public participation.

her cousin's future wife, Romney scolds her for crossing into such a disreputable space and describes her venture into the city slums as an act of bodily contamination:

> You'll suffer me to walk with you beyond
> These hideous streets, these graves, where men alive,
> Packed close with earthworms, burr unconsciously
> About the plague that slew them; let me go.
> The very women pelt their souls in mud
> At any woman who walks here alone.
> How came you here alone? – you are ignorant. (4.386-392)[19]

The city is nothing, however, if not a site of encounters. While Aurora passes through the diseased streets of the slums unscathed, she is nevertheless transformed by her unlikely meeting with Marian. With absolute confidence in the power of poetry, Aurora argues (before her multiple meetings with Marian in London and Paris) that she can speak of – and for – the city even while keeping a literal and figurative distance from it, but Marian is the one to show her the extent to which appearances are misleading and that seeing something is not the same as knowing it. Viewing Marian – who, after leaving Romney, ends up unmarried and childless in Paris – as a loose woman, Aurora betrays the faultiness of her vision since it is not backed by any real knowledge of the city or its citizens. Indeed, Aurora only understands Marian's life after having listened to her story, leading one to conclude that the poet who would speak of (and for) others must first learn how to hear them out.

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[19] Aurora and Romney's descriptions of Marian's neighborhood were standard middle-class reactions to London's slums according to critic Brent Shannon who states that "*Aurora Leigh*'s language of contagion reveals the poet adopting the rhetoric and imagery of the social body popularized by contemporary nineteenth-century social reformers and reflects the widespread anxieties of her middle-class Victorian audience." "'A finished generation, dead of plague': Contagion, the Social Body, and the London Poor in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*," *Studies in Browning and His Circle*, 27 (2006): 42.

If sight alone is an unreliable source of social knowledge, Aurora nevertheless relishes her role as an urban observer. In Paris (where she flees in order to avoid witnessing Lady Waldemar's triumph as Romney's future wife), Aurora adopts the role of a *flâneur* as she takes to the streets in order to transform the surrounding city into poetry:

> These crowds are very good
> For meditation, (when we are very strong)
> Though love of beauty makes us timorous,
> And draws us backward from the coarse town-sights
> To count the daisies upon dappled fields. (6. 135-139)

Unlike Charles Baudelaire – the Parisian flâneur-poet *par excellence* – Aurora does not see the beauty of busy towns and, indeed, she must force herself to look upon this "common, ugly, human dust," which she evidently considers an unappealing, though authentic, source of poetic inspiration (6.162). Her repugnance for the sights that she must look upon – but fails to really see – becomes evident when, in the middle of her walking reverie along the banks of the Seine, she encounters the fleeing figure of Marian Erle. Aurora's recognition becomes a misreading, however, when she sees a prostitute in the woman who had once been her friend. Because this encounter happens in Paris (rather than London) Aurora is free to pursue the prostitute through the streets (and through police stations), but she fails to grasp the implications of finding Marian in an urban oasis rather than in the city's muck where she had been searching. Walking "half-absent, whole-observing" through the flower market, Aurora overestimates her powers of observation when she finds her sought-after friend by overhearing – rather than seeing – her (6.428). Although Aurora repents of her hasty judgment after following Marian to her

home on the outskirts of the city and listening to her tale of abduction, forced intoxication, and rape, she nevertheless retains the poet's prerogative to spin tales from the observed scenes of city life. Indeed, by the time that she, Marian, and the seamstress's son arrive in Florence, Aurora is relieved to find herself among strangers, so that she may look about her without fear of intercepting a recognizing glance in return:

> It's sublime,
> This perfect solitude of foreign lands!
> To be, as if you had not been till then,
> And were then, simply that you chose to be. (7.1192-1195)

The verse-novel traces Aurora's pedagogical progress as she learns to reevaluate poetry, women's work, and love, but she conspicuously fails to absorb the lesson about the dangers of her distanced looking. Keeping herself separate and aloof from the crowds of London, Paris, and Florence, Aurora increases the distance between herself and the real cities of the nineteenth-century until she trades them in altogether for an idealized vision of a utopian New Jerusalem at the end of the text.

The Urban Type as Modern Poetry

If Aurora retreats from the messy realities of urban life while simultaneously reproducing the city as poetry, she is nevertheless pulled into the social dramas between the rich and poor when asked to mediate between sides of a sharply divided Victorian London. It is difficult to imagine that any one living in the nineteenth-century city could escape the problems of urban poverty, but the issue comes home (literally) to Aurora through a knock on her door. Reversing the trope of the insidious masses invading the city, Barrett Browning depicts Lady Waldemar as the invader as she bursts into Aurora's

apartment with the news of Romney's plan to marry into the lower class. Counting on arousing Aurora's class sympathies, Lady Waldemar is disappointed when the poet proclaims a gendered solidarity with Romney's love interest and, instead of helping her fortify the lines dividing the rich from the poor, Aurora carves out a space for the poor within her upper-class urban circle by running to meet Marian. Hoping to effect a separation, in other words, Lady Waldemar only binds Marian more completely to her elevated social world. Moreover, as Lady Waldemar's interference gives Marian a stronger foothold in the upper class, it simultaneously weakens Aurora's seclusion vis-à-vis the city beyond her garret as she evolves – within the triangular configuration formed between her, the spoiled socialite, and the suffering seamstress – from a single-minded writer to a more complex worker-wife.

The paths that cut across city space to bridge these diverse female types – the poet, socialite, and seamstress – signify the real (and occasionally arduous) journeys that the women must take in order to reach one another. Lady Waldemar, for example, arrives out of breath at Aurora's, having had to brave a (literal and figurative) steep ascent to reach the poet. And Aurora sprints through Marian's courtyard as women of her class were wont to do when venturing into the slums, dispensing blessings and coins to the threatening crowd in order to avoid physical or moral contamination. The poet – who earlier regards supplicating letters as too great a distraction from her poetic calling – finds this headlong tumble into the social conflicts of her day and age too much. Attempting a retreat into poetic solitude in order to avoid "The pricking of the map of life with pins, / In schemes of … 'Here we'll go,' and 'There, we'll stay," Aurora is jostled about the

maps of three European cities before the love story between Marian and Romney is resolved (4.460-461). Indeed, while her involvement in the struggle between the widowed socialite and the impoverished seamstress places her in a web of connected women that intersects various social spaces, Aurora's experience of the city (which applies, in this case, to both London and Paris) is shaped by the verse-novel's marriage plot, as her reactions to Romney's numerous marriage proposals impel her to seek Marian and flee Lady Waldemar across urban and national borders.

Instead of dividing the three women who all wish, at one time or another, to marry him, Romney is the link that connects them across vastly different urban spaces. As their common interest and, more importantly, their common ground, Romney brings these social opposites together on relative equal footing only to then disappear from view, leaving them to negotiate their relations with one another. Although Lady Waldemar is a duplicitous figure who uses the other women to get closer to Romney, it is true that Aurora and Marian are the only ones made privy to her true feelings for her philanthropic idol. This intimacy is important, for although she looks upon the other two women as rivals, Lady Waldemar still trusts and confides in them, which, according to Sharon Marcus, is a defining feature of homosocial – rather than heterosexual – relationships: "counseled to be passive in relation to men, women were allowed to act with initiative and spontaneity toward female friends, and friendship enabled women to exercise powers of choice and expression that they could not display in relation to parents or prospective

husbands."[20] Before Romney's proposal elevates Marian to a higher social status, however, her interactions with the Lady Waldemars of the world were scripted by the conventions defining the exploitative relationship between the producers and consumers of fashion. Indeed, as emblems of upper- and lower-class womanhood, Lady Waldemar and Marian exemplify the opposing ends of the problematic garment industry, which captured the public imagination as a site of social struggle. Their first encounter emphasizes the extent to which, though they inhabit the same world of finery and fashion, they are irrevocably cut off from one another. Expressing grief for a fellow worker, Marian is admonished for valuing the working-class life over the luxurious ball gown beneath her needle: "Why, Marian Erle, you're not the fool to cry? / Your tears spoil Lady Waldemar's new dress, / You piece of pity" (4.26-28). Since, as I discuss in Chapter 1, the Victorian sempstress was considered a sort of urban specter – invisible behind the well-dressed populace she outfitted – these tears were the reminder of the trace that the producers of fashion left upon the clothes of the wealthy and were emphasized presumably to challenge the female Victorian reader.

There is, of course, a misleading implication of causality in this connection between the seamstress's tears and the socialite's dress, and one is left with the impression that the latter is the source of the former. The socialite, however, has nothing to do with Marian's friend's illness but – as a consumer of relatively inexpensive and hastily made garments – everything to do with the low pay, long hours, and inhumane work conditions endured by these working women. As a type, she is an obvious (and

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[20] Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007) 56.

convenient) person to blame for London's social ills since, according to critic Dolores Rosenblum, "Lady Waldemar is not only instrumental in the degradation of Marian Erle; she also represents the social order that victimizes the Marian Erles of this world."[21] When recounting her life's sad tale to Aurora, however, Marian implicates not a type but, rather, an entire class of women:

> we've used out many nights,
> And worn the yellow daylight into shreds
> Which flapped and shivered down our aching eyes
> Till night appeared more tolerable, just
> That pretty ladies might look beautiful,
> Who said at last .. 'You're lazy in that house!
> You're slow in sending home the work, - I count
> I've waited near an hour for it.' (4.243-50)

The accusation is neither startling nor original: rich women are clueless about the time and effort required to transform their mere prettiness into beauty. This ignorance, however, was described and decried in countless caricatures, sketches, and literary pieces of the early nineteenth century and was subsequently something that few Victorian women could actually lay claim to, as these images accusing them of a willful blindness would have been constantly before their eyes. When Marian, then, plants herself as the unseen seer in the customer's mirror, she stages a familiar scene wherein the seamstress disappears behind the beauty she produced:

> They are fair, I said; so fair, it scarce seems strange
> That, flashing out in any looking-glass
> The wonder of their glorious brows and breasts,
> They're charmed so, they forget to look behind
> And mark how pale we've grown we pitiful

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[21] Dolores Rosenblum, "Face to Face: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Nineteenth-Century Poetry," *Victorian Studies*, 26.3 (1983): 330.

Remainders of the world. (4.255-60)[22]

Both women are framed by a single mirror and yet there could not – by all popular accounts – exist a greater distance between them. As types representing the city's bejeweled and bedraggled classes, the socialite and the seamstress played out the familiar dramas of self-absorption and self-abnegation for a Victorian readership familiar with the conventions defining these urban figures.

This villain / victim duo is complicated by several key reversals in the relationship between Marian and Lady Waldemar. While their previous "encounters" may have been mediated by clothing, they only formally meet after Romney's marriage proposal propels Marian into Lady Waldemar's higher social sphere and the socialite humbles herself before the seamstress in a – albeit dishonest – gesture of friendship. A veritable wolf in sheep's clothing, Lady Waldemar's appearance of friendliness masks more harmful intentions that Marian – whose familiarity with the type does not prepare her for this interaction with a rival – fails to read. Under the guise of concern for Romney's wellbeing, she dismantles Marian's resolve to marry him and then sends the hapless girl off to Australia with a "trusted" lady's maid. Because Lady Waldemar is beautiful and seems kind, Marian hesitates to implicate her in the disastrous outcome of this plan that ends up planting her in a French brothel. There is, moreover, someone else to take the blame. While critics – and Aurora – often attribute the detour from Australia to France to Lady Waldemar, the socialite denies any knowledge of this plan and accuses

[22] Artists and authors frequently used this trope of a mirror reflecting the self-absorbed beauty and her shadowy seamstress when depicting the relative invisibility of the working-class attendants. See, for example, the image by John Tenniel, "The Haunted Lady, or 'The Ghost in the Looking Glass," discussed in Chapter 1 [figure 1.7].

her own lady's maid of pocketing the money paid out for the longer voyage. The conflation between lady and maid is, of course, another common device recognized by those familiar with these types.[23] If Marian's prior experience with the Lady Waldemars of the world does not equip her to defend herself against this wealthy woman and her complicit entourage, she nevertheless learns the dreadful consequences of being visible in the unequal city.

While Aurora initially views her involvement with these clichéd feminine types as a distraction from her poetry, it is quickly obvious that they are crucial to the poetic work that is *Aurora Leigh*.[24] Because Aurora must learn that the life of the mind cannot substitute and replace a physical or social involvement with the city beyond her garret, she encounters these types who – because they are already established urban figures – can signify the city's realism in an economical way. As a stereotypical seamstress, Marian is initially a plot device for, according to Lynn Alexander, "the established tropes surrounding the seamstress allowed Barrett Browning to establish Marian's character with a minimum of explication, and to foreshadow motivations and plot lines without distracting the reader or undermining necessary points of uncertainty (as when Marian fails to appear for the wedding ceremony)."[25] Introduced in the poem as Romney's fiancée – and symbolical foothold into the lower class – Marian conforms to the image of the poor but deserving seamstress that was already established as a sympathetic figure to

[23] While ambitious lady's maids were easy targets of popular censure, instances when the lady and her maid share the same dubious morals were greeted with more ambivalence. For more about the mutual corruption between maid and lady, see Chapter 4.
[24] Numerous critics have pointed out that Marian's story takes up as much – if not more – narrative space as Aurora's own tale of poetic apprenticeship. See, for example, Marcus, 91-92.
[25] Lynn M. Alexander, *Women, Work, and Representation: Needlewomen in Victorian Art and Literature* (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2003) 149.

a middle-class audience.[26] Born into a poor and shiftless rural family, she narrowly escapes being sold into prostitution by her own mother and arrives, friendless and penniless, in the city where she must work to survive. Her virtue (and Romney) lands her a place in a dress shop where her encounters with her fellow workers and clients are, as Alexander points out, also prescribed by the conventions of the type (148-149). By the time she is engulfed in the verse-novel's marriage plot, Marian is firmly established as a convenient conduit to the city's renowned but invisible spaces.

In the course of her repeated searches for Marian through Paris and London, Aurora evolves from a modern Miriam (an observer of conflict and the voice of contemporary struggles) into a more active and involved witness to city strife. Marian serves, then, as a visible incarnation of invisible social forces, allowing *Aurora Leigh* to achieve its professed poetic goal of capturing its own time and place. Using the seamstress as shorthand for the problems of urban capitalism is an economical way to evoke the city's modernity according to Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz who argue that "representation as the re-presentation of the 'real' marked the defining form of modernity; or, more exactly, that with the advent of a chaotic and diffuse urban culture, the 'real' could increasingly be grasped only through its representations."[27] Along with her factory worker counterpart, the seamstress was the face of Industrial England's working poor and, as such, she served as a symbol of the exploitative labor practices

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[26] Indeed, the seamstress was one of the few images reflecting the Victorian obsession with the social question that was immediately recognizable amongst all social classes. For more on the ubiquity of this image, see T.J Edelstein, "'They Sang the Song of the Shirt: The Visual Iconology of the Seamstress," *Victorian Studies* 23.2 (1980) 184.

[27] Leo Charney and Vanessa R, Schwartz, Introduction, *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, Eds. Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996) 7.

prevalent at the time. Looking at the seamstress as a parable, historian Joan Wallach Scott notes that the recognizability of the type was based on its redundancy: "the story of the seamstress was recounted again and again, becoming a folk tale or morality play with a predictable plot and outcome. The theme of the destruction of innocence by rape or death served as a stark physical analogue for capitalism's impact."[28] The narrative predictability of the seamstress – with her predetermined outcomes of either prostitution or death – is challenged in *Aurora Leigh* when the poet supplies the seamstress's story (without allowing Marian the chance to speak for herself) only to be forced to later eat her words.

If Marian is a type that can resist typecasting, she is nevertheless surrounded by working-class companions that conform to their prescribed roles. Introducing Lucy Graham and Rose Bell into the verse-novel, Barrett Browning displaces the disease and debauchery associated with the working-class urban body onto these disposable figures. Deprived of air, exercise, and sleep, seamstresses were particularly vulnerable to the diseases waging through London's cramped, and rarely sanitary, quarters, and their consumptive bodies filled the pages of urban literature. So when Lucy falls sick and Marian gives up her job to tend to her during her final days, it is not the death of a young girl that is exceptional but, rather, Marian's generous act of self-sacrifice.[29] Moreover, as her compassion for her dying friend causes her to spill tears on a customer's dress,

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[28] Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988) 109.

[29] By valuing Lucy's life over job security and a steady paycheck, Marian follows a pattern established by French grisettes. While the British sempstress was typically represented as a solitary figure in a sea of alienated workers, their French counterparts were embedded in a network of friends and lovers. Indeed, Marian pays a price for these friendships: helping Lucy, she loses her job, and, befriending Rose, she too is accused of dabbling in prostitution. See Chapter 1 for more about the supportive role played by grisettes within their Parisian community.

readers are reminded of the relatively thin line separating their own world of comfort and ease from the sickly bodies of the city's poor.[30] The circulation of contaminated working-class bodies throughout the city took on slightly different implications when the object of exchange was an actual body, rather than a dress. If, as I argue, seamstresses were the urban female type *par excellence*, it was undoubtedly due in part to their close resemblance to – and conflation with – the prostitute. Almost all critical responses to *Aurora Leigh*, in fact, attempt to account for, in one way or another, the verse-novel's treatment of this contemporary problem but few, if any, have looked at the prostitute in relation to the brand of femininity the text rejects. Any woman, in other words, who makes it her "profession" to please men (whether she be a housewife or prostitute) is equally engaged in worthless work. Viewing Marian's childhood friend Rose Bell as yet another urban type – the woman who has failed to become either a worker or a wife – I consider her presence an important lesson about the necessity of finding one's place and establishing connections within the city's social and professional networks.[31] While Marian demonstrates that negotiating these connections can be tricky – and, indeed, even dangerous – Rose and Lucy aptly illustrate that there is no future for those who remain mired in their roles as a type.

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[30] This question of contamination – fueled by the proximity between the diseases of the poor and the dresses of the rich – haunted Victorian public health specialists. Since so much sewing still took place in private homes, no one could be sure of the hygienic measures taken to insure that the clothes remained clean. Indeed, the practice of using unfinished garments as bedding was, according to Christina Walkley, widespread. See, Walkley, *The Ghost in the Looking Glass: The Victorian Seamstress* (London: Peter Owen, 1981) 58.

[31] I do not mean to say that real prostitutes were in fact women who turned down employment or marriage, but rather that is the function that Rose serves in this particular text. A light-hearted, mirthful figure, she is implicated in her own ruin through her very frivolity.

While Marian escapes the necessity of selling her body in order to survive, she nevertheless illustrates a more serious form of sexual exploitation when abducted, drugged, and raped in a French brothel. It is significant, however, that Barrett Browning feels the need to displace this violent scene by distancing it from London. Indeed, the verse-novel is full of such distanced critical observations. Marian can openly critique the double exploitation she experiences as a poor woman since it occurs on French soil just as Aurora, as a British outsider, can find fault with British society.[32] Indeed, if rape is unspeakable – and therefore silenced – in London, Aurora would have had no exposure to such acts, which could be why she initially misreads Marian's situation upon seeing her in Paris. Looking at this inability to recognize the nature of the violence Marian has suffered, critic Laura Rotunno argues "that Aurora is initially unable to understand that Marian's pregnancy was not the result of Marian's fallen nature, but rather the result of a brutal rape, can be read as Aurora's lack of interaction with such a true-to-life 'narrative.'"[33] Aurora is not only slow to recognize what has happened to Marian, she also has trouble naming it:

> And oh, as truly as that was Marian's face,
> The arms of that same Marian clasped a thing
> .. Not hid so well beneath the scanty shawl
> I cannot name it now for what it was.

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[32] For a fuller discussion of how Aurora's foreignness influences her perception, see Maureen Thum, "Challenging Traditionalist Gender Roles: The Exotic Woman as Critical Observer in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*," *The Foreign Woman in British Literature: Exotics, Aliens, and Outsiders*, Ed. Marilyn Demarest Button and Toni Reed (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999) 80-81. While geographical distance is a convenient tool used by women writers to critique sexist practices closer to home, there is nevertheless a problem with projecting a deviant sexuality onto foreign bodies. Aurora is indeed disinherited due to this aberrant sexuality in the form of an Italian mother who "seduced" her British father from his rightful path.

[33] Laura Rotunno, "Writers of Reform and Reforming Writers in *Aurora Leigh* and *A Writer of Books*," *Gender and Victorian Reform*, Ed. Anita Rose (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008) 63.

A child. (6.342-346)

This strong enjambment, which delays naming what Aurora actually saw, and the use of the word "thing" speaks to the distance between the poet and the urban conditions that produce such disreputable sights. It is, moreover, a distance that Aurora must cross before she can rewrite the city as a safe space for the female poets and working women of the world.

If the nineteenth-century city is inherently unsafe for workers (exposing them to the dangers of disease, prostitution, and rape), work is paradoxically what protects them. Marian's entrance into the workforce is in fact an escape from forced prostitution and a long, dangerous fever. Running away from her mother – who wants to sell her daughter to a local squire – Marian is rescued by Romney and by a job:

> to snatch her soul from atheism,
> And keep it stainless from her mother's face,
> He sent her to a famous sempstress-house
> Far off in London, there to work and hope. (3.1229-32)

Reversing the conventions of danger and safety (wherein the family is the only sure safety net that can be used to catch the city's fallen women), work is constructed as a form of physical and spiritual salvation. While the family is not an adequate guardian for any woman in *Aurora Leigh*, Marian nevertheless is protected by a father-figure (her fiancé) as long as she remains in London.[34] Exiled and pregnant in Paris, Marian turns to

[34] The inadequate family is a theme explored by all of the authors I discuss throughout this dissertation. While Elizabeth Barrett Browning echoes these writers by depicting, on one hand, the failure of the family to protect the working women and, on the other, a woman's "rescue" from work through a second, stronger union, she is the only writer in this study to imagine alternate family structures, beyond that of the heterosexual couple.

work – rather than prostitution – to save herself and her son. While one might expect her trust in other women to have been sufficiently shattered, Marian finds that the only way she can properly raise her son is to work surrounded (and supported) by other women:

> I found a mistress-sempstress who was kind
> And let me sew in peace among her girls.
> And what was better than to draw the threads
> All day and half the night for him and him? (7.108-11)

While critics and readers tend to focus on the supportive sort of sisterhood formed between Aurora and Marian, the fact remains that, well before the poet arrives in Paris to "rescue" her long-lost friend, the seamstress already found a safe haven in work and among working-class companions.

When Aurora proposes an escape from Paris – offering Marian financial support and friendship – one is left wondering who is the rescued and who the rescuer for it is the poet who is greater need of female friends. While it is important for her to absorb the lessons that Marian – in the guise of a typical seamstress – can provide vis-à-vis the modern city and its dangers for women, it is even more essential for Aurora to look beyond the appearances of a type, in order to recognize the individual that emerges. As long as she sees all women as types – each playing an undesirable role, such as the angel in the house, self-absorbed socialite, or suffering seamstress – Aurora avoids all female connection since, as she tells Romney, "I would not be a woman like the rest" (9.660). When Marian rewrites Aurora's ready-made story of seduction and betrayal, however, she shows the poet that there is no one kind of woman and that even the most limited types can forge new paths through the poet's narrative and upon the city's streets. While critics debate the extent to which Marian is only in the verse-novel as an instrument in

Aurora's education, I think that, by showing Aurora that her vision is narrow and her stories predictable, Marian is the one who is in fact shaping this tale about the female poet.[35] Moreover, Marian sheds her status as urban symbol when she finds her own voice and speaks up for herself in the final books of the text. When the poet first encounters the seamstress, she consciously reworks Marian's words in order to dramatize the tale of child abuse and working-class exploitation:

> I tell her story and grow passionate.
> She, Marian, did not tell it so, but used
> Meek words that made no wonder of herself
> For being so sad a creature. (3.846-849)

Aurora loses this authority over Marian's life story upon their second meeting in Paris, however, when she presumes to supply her own version of the seamstress's narrative before giving the other woman a chance to speak. Contradicting the poet's hasty judgments, Marian revises Aurora's clichéd tale of seduction and recounts her story of abduction and rape in her own words. No longer paraphrased, Marian can, by the end of the verse-novel, speak for herself and for the poet, who has been unable to recognize or articulate her love for Romney. The speaking seamstress is, however, such an unfamiliar sight to the nineteenth-century urbanite that Aurora has a difficult time accepting such powerful discourse as Marian's:

> The thrilling, solemn voice, so passionless,
> Sustained, yet low, without a rise or fall,
> As one who had authority to speak

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[35] For a critic who views Marian's misadventures through Paris and London as a chance for Aurora to ponder and resolve nineteenth-century social problems, see Margaret Reynolds, "Critical Introduction," *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Ed. Margaret Reynolds (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1992) 28. On the other hand, critic Joyce Zonana argues that the lesson Marian teaches Aurora is that people cannot be made objects of social theories. See Joyce Zonana, "The Embodied Muse: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Feminist Poetics," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 8:2 (1989): 243.

And not as Marian. (9.248-251)

With her refusals (of Romney's renewed proposal) and revelations (of Aurora's feelings for Romney), Marian is the one who writes the verse-novel's ending. Ultimately, she disappears, restoring the noble Romney to an equally noble Aurora, but not before shedding the silence associated with her type. Indeed, if Marian's speech had previously been confined to voicing the conventional litany of wrongs committed against her as a powerless working woman, her final words set her on the path to greater autonomy and social equality enjoyed by women in Aurora's future city.

The Poetic Path to a Utopian City

Ending the verse-novel with Marian's voice and Aurora's vision of a new kind of city, Barrett Browning does not so much conclude the text as much as gesture to other possibilities and the still unwritten futures of these women. Indeed, without the promise of this open ending that positions Marian and Aurora on the brink of a different – hopefully better – world, one can rightfully question what *Aurora Leigh* as a whole is supposed to be about as it jumps from Aurora's artistic development, to her love story with Romney, and, ultimately, to the process she goes through before she is able to envision a new kind of city founded on social justice. These topics are not mutually exclusive but they still manage to confuse readers (and critics) who appear more interested in Aurora's artistic and professional persona and express disappointment in the fact that the woman writer seems about to be subsumed into the wife. While Aurora is no longer defending her right to pursue a poetic path at this point, she is nevertheless

concluding an old argument with Romney about the function of poetry vis-à-vis social inequity and human suffering. Arguing that a poetic oeuvre can in fact be the foundation upon which a new – and more perfect – city is built, Aurora wants to wipe the social slate clean in order to make way for this space of possibility. Turning away from what is in order to embrace what could be, Aurora has, in fact, finally stopped running away from what she early perceives as urban distractions. This new city is frustratingly vague, though, as Thum points out, it was never based on any known model of utopian society as "the lyric – and problematic – vision at the conclusion of the novel poem is not intended as a roadmap for a territory already explored and charted" (90).[36] Indeed, like the female-authored poetry that did not exist until Aurora wrote it, the ideal city is undefined and undetermined as it waits for Aurora (with Romney and Marian's help, of course) to build it.

[36] Other critics have read this New Jerusalem differently. Leslee Thorne-Murphy, for example, sees this city as a safe haven for women, arguing that "In *Aurora Leigh*, she makes it clear that a reformed world would eliminate sexual violence and, more particularly, would rid itself of prostitution." Leslee Thorne-Murphy, "Prostitute Rescue, Rape, and Poetic Inspiration in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*," *Women's Writing* 12.2 (2005): 242. I think, however, that this hypothesis offers too narrow a view of Aurora's vision and is, in fact, another, more woman-centric, version of one of Romney's dreaded phalansteries.

Epilogue: Revisiting Types, Rewriting the City

Observing the removal of an enormously pregnant *piqueuse de bottines* from a bourgeois apartment house, M. Gourd, the concierge in Émile Zola's *Pot-Bouille* (1882), exhorts the building's owner to never again rent to a working woman: "dans une maison qui se respecte, il ne faut pas de femme, et surtout pas de ces femmes qui travaillent."[1] Expelling the unmarried boot maker from this "respectable" building filled with secretive gamblers, unfaithful spouses, and penniless women dressed in deceptive finery, the building's concierge and owner jointly expose and condemn working-class transgressions even as they deliberately ignore or actively cover up the financial and marital hypocrisy of the building's other inhabitants.[2] If during the July Monarchy (1830-1848), the grisette – defined loosely as any kind of working woman – was a visible figure dominating the Parisian panorama, by the Second Empire (1852-1870) she was, more often than not, an urban eyesore to be exiled from central city spaces. It is, of course, quite likely that the number of lower-class women working and living in the city center did not decrease as the century progressed; rather, I argue that, by the end of the July Monarchy, they no

[1] Émile Zola, *Pot-Bouille* (Paris: Fasquelle Éditeurs, 1957) 351.

[2] Working- and middle-class transgressions do, of course, converge throughout the novel in the numerous sexual liaisons between bourgeois men and the female servants working in their kitchens. As members of the middle-class household, however, these women are under the authority of the families that hire them and are thus free from the regulatory gaze of the concierge. The fact that the pregnant *piqueuse* is seen as a visual affront to bourgeois respectability, while the equally pregnant maid Adèle is able to hide her pregnancy, deliver in secret, and discard her baby without attracting the attention of anyone in the house is significant. Impregnated by one of her middle-class lovers, Adèle's sexual exploitation is an invisible feature of bourgeois life. Because the *piqueuse*'s sexual life is outside this protection, however, she is severely punished by bourgeois institutions: first she is kicked out of the house once the term of her rented room is up and then she is arrested and condemned for infanticide when poverty and desperation lead her to kill her baby.

longer constituted an alluring, or even viable, urban type. Indeed, in the final decades of the nineteenth century, texts and images depicting Paris and London tended to focus on the experience of bourgeois – rather than working-class – women in the city. When workers did appear, they were less frequently depicted as guides to unknown city sectors and more often framed as intruders in bourgeois city spaces. Looking, then, at the changed representations of working-class women within the metropolis, I argue that, by the end of the century, working women were no longer visually appealing urban types but, rather, provocative (and often disturbing) figures upon the urban panorama.

New Spaces, New Workers: Changes in Perception

If cities are, as David Harvey asserts, spaces where "the streets, neighborhoods, apartments, stairways, and doorways are redolent with social meaning," *where* a person is viewed determines, in part, *how* a person is viewed.[3] The reason Zola's M. Gourd finds the pregnant *piqueuse* so offensive, in other words, is because, as a worker, she is an incongruous figure in the bourgeois space of the apartment house. Workers were not entirely expelled from the bourgeois sectors of Paris and London, however, and the development and popularity of new urban spaces – such as the department store, restaurant, or exhibition – during the latter half of the nineteenth century brought urbanites from all classes together. New ambiguities were created, moreover, as it grew more and more difficult to distinguish between workers and customers, cocottes and wives. Looking at how these spaces raised new issues of feminine legibility, Zola, in his

[3] David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 55.

1883 celebration of modern urban commerce *Au Bonheur des Dames*, illustrates the extent to which social ambiguity became a new norm. Indeed, female sales staff were, at best, interstitial figures belonging to no distinct class, according to critic Michael Miller, who affirms that "women clerks were not quite full-fledged bourgeoises, but they were not quite working-class either, and, if the nature of their work placed them close to the latter, the nature of their life style approximated the former."[4] If the nature of their work (and the dress-code it required) propelled department store workers into a nebulous social position, it is equally true that middle-class women often sought employment and adopted a new identity as workers. In his 1893 novel *The Odd Women*, George Gissing profiles the "new" female worker as a middle-class woman who works because she cannot – or will not – marry.[5] It becomes clear that, in this woman-crowded novel, the apparent legibility of a single working-class type has been replaced by a multiplicity of ambiguous types. As the city filled with offices and shops employing women, it became (in some cases) increasingly difficult to distinguish between women of the working-class and middle-class women workers.

By the end of the nineteenth-century authors and artists depicted working women in such a way as to elude easy meaning or even to refuse meaning altogether. One thinks, for example, of Edgar Degas's images of milliners from the 1880s. On one hand, they are obviously lower-class types who were painted in a way that stressed the physical nature of their work. Yet as urban types frequently sexualized within art and literature, Degas's

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[4] Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981) 195-96.

[5] Marriage, moreover, is not exactly a safe haven for working women in this novel, as Monica Madden discovers when she is "rescued" from work by being bullied into wedlock.

milliners resist such a facile reading.[6] They might, for example, evoke a sense of excitement vis-à-vis the urban panorama and the spectacle of commerce so prominently displayed, but they elicit a very different response than do Gavarni's images of *modistes* created in the 1830s.[7] Still decidedly urban, these figures no longer seemed to be a convenient way to "experience" urban life nor did they serve as moral lessons about the dangers that the city poses to the women who would wander – and work – in it.

That said, the city *does* pose a danger to Zola's *piqueuse*, who falls prey to two of the greatest urban ills: homelessness and prison. Her story of vulnerability and sexual exploitation differs, however, from Eugène Sue and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's earlier depictions of raped workers in that, rather than being framed as a victim, the *piqueuse* is seen as a threat. Kicked out of the apartment house, she is turned into a public menace, which was, according to Elizabeth Wilson, the common fate of working women as, "having in many cases almost no 'private sphere' to be confined to, they thronged the streets – this was one of the major threats to bourgeois order and to read the journalism of the mid and late nineteenth century is to be struck by their *presence* rather than their absence."[8] This exaggerated presence means, of course, that she was still a recognizable – and highly visible – feature of the urban panorama. Consistently staged as an urban spectacle, working women were nevertheless viewed differently as the concerns and anxieties of the observer (vis-à-vis the changing metropolis) evolved throughout the

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[6] If viewers saw sexual stereotypes in Degas's milliners, they were nevertheless more nuanced figures that the milliners depicted throughout the July Monarchy, according to Eunice Lipton, as "they signified sexuality, but they also refused that signification." Eunice Lipton, *Looking into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986) 163.

[7] See Lipton, 159.

[8] Elizabeth Wilson, "The Invisible *Flâneur*," *New Left Review* 191 (1992): 104.

nineteenth century. If, as I have been arguing, these women were invented as a type by the conventions of the gaze that was turned upon them, the gazers are similarly constructed by their practices of looking; as Griselda Pollock notes, "the entry into representation of the body of the laboring woman formed an intersection at which the complex of *savoir*, class surveillance, and class sexualities constructed each other around the interests of the subject these forces collectively produced, the bourgeois masculine subject."[9] I am drawn to the example of surveillance within Zola's text namely because M. Gourd is *not* bourgeois, though he throws himself into this job of policing class borders.[10] As a concierge, M. Gourd occupies a particular urban space that is (one could say) marginally marginalized by the class whose interests he protects. Through M. Gourd's practice of selective seeing, Zola creates an urban observer who is more or less indifferent to gender boundaries but who, instead, insists on securing a clear demarcation between the working and middle classes.

The Accessible City

As middle-class women took to the streets in pursuit of pleasure or in the course of their philanthropic activities in the late nineteenth century, the idea of a class- (rather than gender-) based surveillance became increasingly important.[11] Because working

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[9] Griselda Pollock, "The Dangers of Proximity: The Spaces of Sexuality and Surveillance in Word and Image," *Discourse* 16.2 (1993/1994): 5.

[10] His spying is class, rather than gender, specific. Before the *piqueuse*'s arrival in the building, her room had been rented to a working-class man who was likewise dismissed based on M. Gourd's accusations of sexual impropriety (in his case, he was caught having sexual relations with his wife).

[11] As the city became more and more open to bourgeois women, working-class men found their access to urban spaces circumscribed. According to Judith Walkowitz, they faced arbitrary arrest if seen (and recognized through their workman clothing) outside working-class neighborhoods. Judith Walkowitz, *City*

women were always seen as potential prostitutes, their presence on the streets of Paris and London threatened these more respectable urban strollers who ran a risk of being confounded with this disreputable class of women. So while class confusion caused by ambiguous dress was not limited to the late nineteenth century, instances of bourgeois women being apprehended by the police (or solicited by respectable-looking men) multiplied as the streets became an appropriate domain for all kinds of women.[12] Working women were thus simultaneously threatened (by men who continued to view them as urban eye candy) and threatening as their very presence jeopardized the respectability of the bourgeois women with whom they now shared the streets.

Reading these changed perceptions of working women as reflections of the transforming urban scene, one can see that, as the city became accessible to solitary bourgeois women (or even to families pursuing leisure activities outside the home), ranks were closed against the city's circulating poor. Charles Baudelaire's 1862 prose poem "Les Yeux des Pauvres" illustrates this "problem" wherein urban poverty is viewed as a transgression. Exposing this encounter between leisured and impoverished urbanites by setting it against the background of a modern café (enticing for its gas-lit splendor and bustling surroundings of Haussmann's *grands boulvevards*), Baudelaire reads class struggle in the eyes of the poor man and his two small children who stand gaping at the spectacle of ease and glamour offered by this new urban venue. The poem does not, however, stage a conflict between classes but, rather, between the two café-goers who

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of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992) 42.

[12] See Walkowitz, 50.

view the scene from different perspectives. Whereas the poem's speaker sees himself (and his excesses) reflected through the eyes of the poor, and subsequently feels guilty for this conspicuous display of opulence in which he is participating, his lover (who is presumably a cocotte and of a social class with access to money and leisure but not, obviously, to respect and social prestige) wants the poor man and his children turned away for spoiling her view of the surrounding urban panorama. While Parisians in the 1860s would have still been adapting to these new quasi-public (and deceptively private) spaces created by café terraces and the like, it is clear that money – and not necessarily masculinity – was (and continues to be) the passport to city spaces. This comes as no surprise to us, of course, since the entire notion of the "urban poor" seems somewhat dated as a concept since those who most visibility signify poverty (namely lower-class workers) have, in most cases, already been pushed to the urban peripheries and exiled from the city center.[13] The boisterous and bawdy world of Henry Mayhew's ambulatory street sellers or the raucous fishmongers thronging about the vicinity of *Les Halles* were, by the end of the century, no longer colorful participants in the urban panoramas of London and Paris but, rather, unsightly reminders of urban poverty that was in the process of being swept out of sight.

Looking at the flirtatious grisette and the martyred sempstress as urban types specific to the interval roughly spanning 1830 to 1850, I argue that they are such short-lived figures because they represent, more than anything else, a cultural moment on the

[13] While no one can absolutely assert that urban poverty does not exist, it is nevertheless true that the city centers of Paris and London had – throughout the nineteenth century – become less and less hospitable (or affordable) for working-class families that, for the most part, relocated to cheaper working-class neighborhoods of the suburbs. See Harvey, 138-139.

verge of disappearing. Inserted into countless texts and images as ubiquitous features of everyday urban life, these women were emblems of modernity for the spectator who gazed upon them. Indeed, most often reflecting the observer's own sense of excitement or, conversely, melancholia, these figures all "said things" about urban conditions, but the message was mediated by the experiences, fears, and hopes of the viewer.[14] Moreover, while carefree grisettes and languishing sempstresses were articulations of the city's new economic practices and social structures, they also evoked a sense of the recent urban past (with its rural roots, its presumed naivety, and unshakeable faith in urban progress). Issuing forth from Paris's bohemian Latin Quarter or London's cramped and impoverished courtyards, these textual working women were guides (exposing readers to unfamiliar parts of the city) and proverbial canaries (experiencing urban dangers through their own bodies as a warning to others). For all her many manifestations throughout the nineteenth century, the working woman invented within a popular print culture is an evocative type that embodies an idea of the city that sees itself as modern but is nevertheless already nostalgic for a past on the brink of being produced.

[14] By "observer" and "viewer," I also mean to imply "author," "artist," and "reader."

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